Roundtable on Civil-Military Coordination summary note

Responding to natural disasters: Coordination between national armies, regional organisations, and humanitarian actors in the Asia Pacific Region

Bangkok, Thailand, 14 December 2012

Background

In recent years national and international militaries have played an increasingly important role in crisis relief efforts, and disaster management in particular has come to be seen as one of their core tasks. Disaster management is growing not least because the incidence of disasters of all sizes is predicted to increase in frequency. As the frequency and the human cost of natural disasters rises, humanitarian and military actors will increasingly find themselves trying to assist the same populations.

However, despite existing guidance on the use of military assets in humanitarian response, their use continues to be a source of tension between international humanitarian and military actors in some contexts and there are several challenges to achieving an effective dialogue between these actors. Early structured engagement by humanitarian actors with the military, i.e. before a disaster strikes, may go some way to improving the overall response. Such early engagement would ideally build relations, clarify roles, ensure appropriate preparations for disaster response and raise awareness of the distinct nature of humanitarian action and the need to preserve the integrity of humanitarian principles.

The *HPG Roundtable on civil-cilitary coordination in the Asia Pacific region* aimed to contribute to such engagement. This roundtable brought together various stake-holders from the UN, humanitarian agencies, regional bodies, government representatives, and military and security bodies to explore policy and operational debates relating to civil-military coordination in disaster management in the Asia-Pacific region. More specifically, the three panels explored the role of national armies as first responders, the mechanisms applied by regional organisations when responding to disasters, and considered civil-military coordination issues as experienced in a specific complex emergency case-study. The final session discussed humanitarian principles in the Asia-Pacific context and ways to reinforce dialogue among the various actors involved in disaster response in the region.

The evolving role of national armies in disaster management and response

Civil-military relations in the context of coordination between international armed forces (UN missions or UN mandated international deployments) have been the subject of much debate over the past years, which has helped in sharing knowledge of and raising awareness to some of the challenges. However, interaction between the humanitarian community and national armies responding to disasters in their own country is still a relatively new and under-researched phenomenon. Guidelines such as the MCDA (Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets) were developed to assist the humanitarian community in deciding when to use foreign military assets. These guidelines are less helpful in a context where a government can use its military within the bounds of international law in any shape or form it deems useful and necessary. Many humanitarian agencies are more familiar with armed forces in the context of conflicts rather than as first responders in a disaster response, as was the case in Pakistan in 2005. In addition, coordination in a purely conflict-related or disaster-related context is less challenging than dealing with complex emergencies that require quite a specific approach and where general guidelines cannot help.

The roundtable was an opportunity to present several national systems for disaster management. The cases of the Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand were presented by representatives from the respective national disaster management authorities of the countries.

Malaysian National Security Council (NSC) directive no. 20 (1997) sets the responsibilities and functions of agencies under an integrated disaster management system. The National Security Division (NSD) is responsible for the coordination of activities in disaster situations. The Disaster management and Relief Committee (DMRC) carries out the NSC's responsibilities in coordinating at all three levels: federal, state and district. In 1995 the Special Malaysia Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team (SMART) was formed with its role defined in NSC Directive no. 19. Future goals for Malaysia's disaster management system include mainstreaming disaster risk reduction (DRR) in policy implementation, planning and development by involving sectorial agencies, placing DRR as the main agenda in national development and enforcing compliance of regulations in order to shift from a response-based paradigm to a prevention-based one. Other goals include increasing public awareness through education and promotion of public participation in disaster management.

The Philippines' National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC) in collaboration with the Office of Civil Defence, UNISDR and UNDP has recently developed a long-term Strategic National Action Plan (SNAP) which will cover a ten-year period starting from 2009. One of the key elements is an early warning system that enables the Council to alert and mobilise resources within the civil defence structure, coordinate the national response and manage information. As the highest policy-making body it is also tasked with advising the government on the status of national disaster preparedness, making recommendations to the government on its State of Calamity Declaration in disaster-affected areas and releases funds for the response. An example of its practical application was seen during Typhoon Bopha which triggered a set of actions such as warning signals alerting areas against possible flash floods and landslides, SMS alerts of severe weather bulletins, precautionary measures such as pre-emptive evacuations from low-lying areas and disaster preparedness meetings with concerned agencies.

In Thailand, the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation (DDPM) established under the Ministry of Interior in 2002, is the central agency responsible for coordinating disaster response, disaster risk reduction and coordination among all relevant agencies at all levels. The Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Act (DPMAct) came into force in 2007 cancelling the Civil Defense Act 1979 and is led by the Minister of Interior. The National Committee on Disaster Prevention and Mitigation (NCDPM), chaired by the Prime Minister, serves as a policy-making body. The Director of the DDPM is the Secretary General of the NCDPM and is the Incident Commander in the occurrence of a disaster. The DDPM is currently working jointly with the UNDP on a three-year 1.2$ million initiative aimed at reducing the vulnerability of the millions of people affected by the 2011 floods. It will strengthen Thailand's disaster management system by boosting institutional capacity of the department as well as that of related ministries so that they are suitably prepared for climate change and environmental issues in the future. Through this initiative, experts are evaluating and assessing capacity gaps in the DPMAct, the National Disaster and Mitigation Plan, and the strategic National Action Plan for DRR. Through UNDP's quality technical assistance and knowledge management services on early recovery and DRR, it is hoped these these initiatives will raise the country's national disaster management capacity to acceptable international standards.

Regional approaches
Regional cooperation is playing an increasingly important role in the Asia-Pacific region. In Southeast Asia, the primary intergovernmental forum is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In addition to ASEAN, other regional organisations focussing on disaster management include the Asian

Disaster Reduction Centre (ADRC) which comprises 30 member countries, and the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC).

ASEAN's main forum for dealing with humanitarian assistance is the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM). The ACDM was responsible for establishing the ASEAN Response Action Plan, which evolved into the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). The ACDM is a committee governed by the proceedings of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management (AMMDM). In addition to the ACDM and AADMER-related mechanisms, two other main forums touch on issues relating to humanitarian crisis and assistance: the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

The AADMER seeks to provide effective mechanism for substantial reduction of disaster losses and joint response to disaster emergencies through concerted national efforts and intensified regional cooperation. The AADMER represents a legally-binding regional policy agreement to support ongoing and planned national initiatives of Member States, support and complement national capacities and existing work programmes. Under the AADMER, programs will be developed at the regional level but the primary responsibility for the implementation of the AADMER shall be with the ASEAN Member States. The AADMER was signed by ASEAN Foreign Ministers in July 2005. It was ratified by all 10 member-states and entered into force on 24 December 2009. The AADMER sets in place regional policies, operational, and logistical mechanisms to enable ASEAN Member States to seek and extend assistance in times of disaster and carry out collaborative undertakings on disaster mitigation, prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery and rehabilitation. The AADMER contains provisions on disaster risk identification, monitoring and early warning, prevention and mitigation, preparedness and response, rehabilitation, technical cooperation and research, mechanisms for coordination, and simplified customs and immigration procedures.

The disaster management approach of another regional organisation, the European Union, was also presented, as well as the IFRC's International Disaster Response Laws, Rules and Principles programme.

Coordination, gaps and complementarity
Large-scale disasters go well beyond the capacity of one single organisation and increasingly the operational field is shared by diverse actors who in the past may have met only rarely or never at all. Coordination is thus a new experience for the military as well as for many of the humanitarian organisations. The roundtable discussed issues underlying coordination challenges, such as the lack of a common vocabulary, differences in the analysis of the context, organisational set-up and culture, understanding of humanitarian principles and lack of familiarity with respective mandates. For example, the military may use the term 'cleared' for an area which it understands to be clear of unexploded ordnance while the humanitarian community understands it to be cleared for the return of internally displaced persons.

The general assumption is that militaries are quick to react with logistical means unavailable to humanitarian agencies. However, this ignores the fact that militaries depend on the decisions of their political authorities, who are often civilian. The swift deployment of militaries depends on swift political decisions. A case in point is the request to evacuate third-country nationals during the conflict in Libya in 2011, an operation that went underway very rapidly. It was pointed out that any coordination in the run-up to deployment needs to have humanitarian agencies present in order to ensure that issues such as humanitarian principles are introduced as early as possible. Once the process is underway, it becomes very difficult to influence it from a humanitarian perspective.

The experience from joint planning exercises is generally seen as positive as both the military as well as humanitarian organisations learn from each other and some barriers based on misconceptions are broken down. Once such dialogue is established it becomes much easier to continue engaging.

Mechanisms
Promoting communication channels between civil and military actors during, before and after an emergency has been signalled as crucial for successful coordination. The practical advantages of communication between actors during an emergency were discussed, such as avoiding duplication of efforts and competition in order to improve effectiveness. A suggested coordination mechanism was the formulation of a common damage assessment and constant information sharing during a response. The creation of an open platform for sharing of lessons learnt after experiences of coordination has been proposed as a tool for improvement and dialogue.

At the regional level, a variety of Asia-Pacific based mechanisms have been established to improve coordination and response to emergencies. Through the Japan-ASEAN integration fund, for example, a disaster emergency logistic system hub has been setup in Subang, Malaysia. The ASEAN Disaster Emergency Stockpile Centre at the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) was planned to become fully operational in February 2013. The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management, or AHA Centre's, objectives are to ensure quick provision of relief items for medium/large scale disasters and to establish a regional disaster monitoring, risk and situational analysis organisation.

Internationally, UN-CMCoord has been established as a framework to facilitate interaction between civil and military actors, protect humanitarian principles and promote coordination. It attempts to shape context-specific policy based on international guidelines, coordination structures, partnerships and training. Its role is focussed on complex emergencies and high-risk environments.

Principles, concepts and guidelines
Emphasis was put on the need to respect humanitarian principles while recognising that even among the humanitarian community the adherence is not necessarily uniform or consistent. For example, some aid agencies may choose to accept armed escorts while others do not. There is also at times confusion as to what it means when the military provides direct or indirect assistance and whether it is always possible to distinguish between the two. This is a point that remained inconclusive and participants agreed that it merited further discussions.

Challenges to humanitarian space are particularly pronounced in complex emergencies and raise concerns among humanitarian agencies. Armies may want to show a 'humane' face by providing assistance to the affected population; however, they may also be a party to the conflict at the same time. The perception of the affected population is very important and if a humanitarian agency is seen as or believed to be biased then this can potentially have repercussions on the security. It was pointed out that aid agencies stay longer after the military has left and therefore have to deal with any negative perception.

There was a strong sense that while guidelines are important as a framework within which actors operate, there was also an emphasis on the need to contextualise them. Existing guidelines such as ASEAN's Standard Operating Procedure for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Response Operations (SASOPS) and AADMER have been argued to be designed around how governments will interact with governments to support those who are affected by the disaster and fail to outline the role of non-state actors. The complexity of encompassing regulations for all actors within a single document is recognised to be complex.

Conclusion

Civil-military coordination is key in fulfilling the humanitarian objective of saving lives in the context of disaster response. It is important to use civil-military interaction to have a structured exchange that allows for more effective assistance to affected populations. A focus on the outcomes, namely delivering assistance and saving lives, as opposed to the processes within civil-military interaction, is argued to, perhaps, improve engagement and integrity in particular on issues such as humanitarian principles. There was consensus that events like this were important to help humanitarian and military actors who operate in the same space further appreciate the complementarity of their mandates and ways of working. A change in mind-set was nonetheless encouraged to avoid considering military actors as part of the problem but as part of the solution. Due to the differences in culture and background of the two actors, it was recognised that civil and military actors will not always agree with each other. However, an improved respect for each other's rules and an understanding of the limitations in each other's engagement is necessary for coordination. In the Asia-Pacific context, more engagement with emerging institutionalised regional and national agreements and guidelines could be a step towards more successful coordination and collaboration. Sustained, open and three-way communication between governments, militaries and the international humanitarian community is critical.