

COURSE : DISASTER MANAGEMENT (MA/MSc PART I)

Paper : VIII

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Topic : Role of Army in Disaster Management

INTRODUCTION

By armed forces we know the military forces of a country. Armed forces include army, navy and air force who served as the military force of the nation. Armed forces symbolize the defence of the nation. For this they trained, equipped and prepared themselves for all operations expected to be carried out during any unwanted circumstances. With the increasing threat created by terrorism and localized disturbances armed forces have had to adapt and train themselves in order to carry out operations. Disaster management and response is one of these activities. The role of armed forces in disaster management is very important. The Disaster Management Act 2005 is a vital instrument which explains the role and functions of various agencies. It is also a tool to bring in a sense of accountability and responsibility. This act mentions the deployment of naval, military and air forces and other armed forces of the Union or any other civilian personnel as may be required for the purposes of this Act.

The armed forces due to their organization, training, manpower and dedications are playing a significant role in disaster management. Their ability to work under adverse ground and climatic conditions is an unusual attribute to help to civil authority during disasters. Government, civil society and all other stakeholders have incredible faith and believe that all types of disaster can be efficiently handled by the armed forces. The Indian armed forces are one of the most dedicated professional and modernized armed forces in the world. They are always in a state

of operational readiness to move quickly to any disaster affected area. Besides, NDRF also played an important role in rescue and relief operation in all major disasters in the country; in fact their service during the disasters reduces the pressure on the armed forces. The armed force will continue to play a vital role in disaster response as they are the core of the government's response capacity in major disaster situations.

With resources and capabilities at their disposal, the armed forces have historically played a major role in emergency support services.

Theoretically, the Armed Forces are called upon to assist the civil administration only when the situation is beyond their coping capability. But, in practice, the armed forces form an important part of the Government's response capacity and are immediate responders in all serious disaster situations. On account of their vast potential to meet any adverse challenge, speed of operational response and the resources and capabilities at their disposal, the armed forces have historically played a major role in emergency support functions. These include search and rescue operations, health and medical facilities, and transportation, especially in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. It can be said that armed forces played a vital role in disaster management as part of overall national strategy to cope with disaster in India. The main role of armed forces is to coordinate the employment of forces and conduct relief operation in disaster management. Various roles of armed forces are discussed below:

- **Rescue operation** as it is the main work for every organization at the time of any disaster. In rescue operation the armed forces play an important role as they are well trained and well equipped as compared to the other civil organizations.
- **Evacuation of people** as in disaster management one of the most important parts is to safely evacuate the people to a safer place provide essential needs like food, shelter and clothing etc.
- Immediate restoration of essential services like electricity, water and telephone lines etc.
- Set up emergency hospitals
- Repair of roads and bridges

Challenges faced by Armed Forces in Disaster Management

In India the armed forces have played an important role in disaster management as a force of the nation. If any disaster may be natural or manmade breaks out the Government called them to help and rescue the people. But, when they are helping the people they are also facing many challenges, some of the main challenges are follows:

- **Preparedness for disaster response** as most of the disaster comes without any intimation especially man made disasters.

- **Conducting relief operations** a huge challenge in case of disaster with grave magnitudes.
- **Increasingly uneven frequency of disasters** in the recent years in both types; natural as well as manmade.
- **Always the first respondent** in any disaster is the main challenge for the armed forces as they have to face the unknown situation.
- **Resource constraint** is also huge challenge for armed forces and in situation of disaster they have to use their limited resources which even cause them mental distress.

From times immemorial, the Indian armed forces have always done a commendable job, when called to aid civil authorities, especially, in the wake of natural calamities or man-made disasters. Although, the armed forces are supposed to be called upon to intervene and take on specific tasks only when the situation is beyond the capability of civil administration, in practice, they are the “core of the government response capacity” and tend to be the first responders of the Government of India in a major disaster. Both the government and the public repose tremendous faith in the armed forces and believe that all emergencies and crises can be handled by the armed forces effectively. That notwithstanding, there appears to be a growing concern in some quarters, within the ‘defence fraternity’, that, of late, the armed forces are over-involved in aid to civil authority. There are two divergent views on this: one recommends dampening our response and discourages over-enthusiasm; the other recommends a larger, proactive and more participative role. However, in view of an increasing propensity on the part of the civil administration to requisition them for incidents of a routine nature, there is an urgent need to carry out reappraisal of the role of the armed forces in aid to civil authority, especially in contingencies relating to disaster management.

The Indian armed forces have rendered disaster aid to a number of countries in the past, adding yet another dimension to the international disaster response. A number of neighbouring countries look up to India on many a front, especially when struck by a major calamity. With growing regional and global cooperation in disaster reduction and response, the Indian armed forces can play a vital role befitting India’s emerging status of a regional power.

Role of Armed Forces in Disaster

Management Although there is no need to prioritise the various secondary roles of the armed forces, aid to civil authority in the case of disaster management needs no clarification or emphasis. However, an important issue is the interpretation of the term 'disaster' in the issue of aid to civil authorities. Disaster by definition is an event of natural or man-made causes that leads to sudden disruption of normalcy within society, causing damage to life and property to such an extent, that normal social and economic mechanisms available are inadequate to restore normalcy⁴. Therefore, technically, the armed forces need to be requisitioned by the civil administration only if the situation is clearly beyond the control and capacity of the local administration. It does not necessarily mean that the armed forces will only be pressed into service after exhausting the resources and efforts of the civil administration in case of a disaster. Sequential deployment of rescue and relief resources, or a graduated response by various entities to emergencies is fraught with the dangers of delay, and the situation going beyond control. Ideally, a quick and comprehensive assessment of the required response to a disaster or impending disaster is needed. This will facilitate deployment of the necessary resources, including the armed forces elements, without loss of time, to limit the damage and losses to a minimum.

The disaster management cycle consists of six stages: Prevention, Mitigation, Preparedness, Response (Rescue and Relief), Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. However, the armed forces are traditionally called to assist in the response stage of the disaster management cycle for search, rescue and relief. This is also the stage where losses can be minimised and lives saved by rescuers acting swiftly and in a professional manner. Time, at this stage, is always at a premium. Hence, this is the most crucial stage of the "Disaster Management Cycle" and timely and effective employment of the armed forces in search, rescue and relief operations can pay rich dividends in terms of limiting damage and saving lives. However, can the armed forces be called only at the rescue and relief stage? What if a major disaster is forecast and heavy losses appear imminent? Can it be assumed that the impending situation is within the means of the local administration or otherwise? There is no clear-cut answer to this question. However,

there can be a few scenarios, where deployment of the armed forces, just before occurrence of a disaster may result in saving lives and property.

Consider the scenario of an early warning of a tsunami of the magnitude of the tsunami of 2004, that caused havoc in India and the South Asian countries. In case of an early warning, immediate assessment of such a disaster would warrant large scale actions entailing early warning to the masses, evacuation from vulnerable areas, and adequate reaction time to launch rescue and relief operations adopting a proactive approach. Review of the situation may also highlight that the magnitude of the impending disaster is so high that the efforts of the civil administration would be woefully inadequate, necessitating assistance from the armed forces. Though the armed forces are always alert and stay abreast with the news and weather forecasts, it would be prudent for the civil administration to keep the armed forces formations / units in the picture of the developing crisis and / or even warn in advance to avoid any loss of time in deployment. While mechanisms of this kind exist in a number of states, they need to function with the requisite seriousness. Hence, sometimes, the civil administration may have to requisition aid from the armed forces in anticipation, even before the occurrence of a major disaster. However, such requisitioning should be resorted to only in critical circumstances and only once the civil administration has done its homework (detailed analysis of emergency, available resources to respond and anticipated shortages and infirmities) and is confident its own response will not measure up to the enormity of the emergency.

Reasons Necessitating Increased Deployment of Armed Forces in Disaster Management Developing countries like India and other neighbouring countries in South Asia are highly vulnerable to climate change and with the ongoing rapid developmental activities, we may witness worse disasters in the times to come. Hence, it will not be inappropriate to assume that in spite of the raising of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and State Disaster Response Forces (SDRF), the armed forces will continue to get embroiled in rescue and relief operations due to the triggering of disasters of unprecedented magnitude as a result of climate change and haphazard development. Eight NDRF units are presently deployed in nine locations across the country. Hence, in a number of cases, the armed forces may have to respond to a

disaster even before the NDRF units, on account of their being located closer to the site of disaster than the NDRF units. Crisis management and managing disasters in remote and inaccessible areas where the armed forces are either deployed in the vicinity or due to their intrinsic capacity to reach such areas in an early time-frame would necessitate an active role of the armed forces, a case in point being the Kashmir earthquake (2005).

The next important aspect is the public faith in troops and resultant pressure on the administration to call the armed forces to provide succour to affected disaster victims. The reason why the armed forces are called upon to aid civil administration in the very first instance is the public outcry, growing political sensitivities and ever increasing media glare. No government or political establishment is willing to take a chance; hence, deployment of the armed forces in such scenarios becomes a play-safe option. Therefore, there is a need for a mechanism to carry out an audit, post-disaster, to examine whether deployment of the armed forces in aid to civil authority was done as a last resort or otherwise. This will help put a check on unwarranted deployment of troops when other governmental entities could undertake relief operations.

Another major reason necessitating deployment of the armed forces in disaster response could be in case of mass casualty events (MCE). The threat of nuclear, biological and chemical warfare (NBCW) is more pronounced today than ever before. With increasing intelligence reports of terrorist groups trying hard to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and terrorist strikes of the types of 9 / 11, MCE would surmount local capacities and necessitate deployment of the armed forces in disaster response.

Role of Armed Forces in International Disaster Response The Indian armed forces, have, in the last one decade, been involved in disaster response at the international level, especially in South Asia. With growing regional and global cooperation on the issue, many countries look up to India in case of emergencies. Recent instances of rendition of aid further underline the international dimension of the Indian armed forces' response and relief capacity:

- Katrina Disaster. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, approximately 25 tonnes of disaster relief supplies were dispatched in an IL- 76 sortie to the USA on September 9, 2005.

- Philippines Mudslide. In the aftermath of extensive mudslides in Leyte (East Philippines) on February 17, 2006, approximately 30 tonnes of disaster relief supplies, including medicines, were dispatched in an IL-76 sortie to Philippines on February 22, 2006.
- Indonesia Earthquake. In the aftermath of the extensive earthquake in Jakarta (Indonesia) on May 27, 2006, approximately 86 tonnes of disaster relief supplies, including medicines, were dispatched in two IL-76 sorties and INS TABAR to Indonesia in May / June 2006.
- Lebanon. Similarly, during the recent crisis in Lebanon , 3,200 blankets and 225 tents were dispatched to Lebanon on August 18, 2006

Additionally, our armed forces have, on a number of occasions, assisted Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries, as in the aftermath of the tsunami (2004) and the Kashmir earthquake (2005). The armed forces play a major role in building our national image in world fora. Disaster response / assistance to India's neighbours and other countries in the region can go a long way in establishing our status as a major regional power besides demonstrating the Indian culture of helping humanity sans frontiers. Hence, the armed forces can expect a significant role in disaster response in South Asia and even in far off countries in the times to come. The response to disasters in other countries has a number of additional operational, logistic and diplomatic dimensions and will have to be planned, on the lines of out of area contingencies (OOAC). Operational capacities of the formations / units earmarked for such tasks will have to be built to be able to respond to emergencies, professionally and in keeping with the best global standards.