

Caribbean Defence Forces: Support to Civilian Authorities During Natural Disasters

by

Dion E. Phillips

Professor of Sociology

University of the Virgin Islands

The Caribbean Military and Its Missions and Roles: Traditional and Non-Traditional

Few issues are more important to the Caribbean military than the need to assess its missions and roles in the early 21st centuryⁱ. At their outset, most of the regular military organizations or defence forces of the Caribbean were ostensibly established for defence mainly to provide for the nation's external securityⁱⁱ. In other words, the core mission of the military was combat readiness — to deter and, if necessary, to fight — when national interests are threatened. For example, the Jamaica Defense Force (JDF) was, in its formative years, oriented toward national defense as expressed in its training exercises, such as “Exercise Watchful,” which were concerned with preventing guerrilla insertions from the sea as well as search and destroy procedures in the interior of the island.

However, this emphasis on defence was soon downgraded if not dropped in favor of an emphasis on internal securityⁱⁱⁱ. In fact, in response to the U.S. action in Grenada in 1983 dubbed “Urgent Fury”, the People's Revolutionary Army of Grenada and the Belize Defense Force, created prior to independence to deter Guatemalan incursion, are the only two forces that have had to put up token efforts at defence.

Since their inception, Caribbean defence forces have all undertaken disaster relief operations. As far back as September 1967, the Trinidad and Tobago Defense Force Coast Guard provided assistance to the people of St. Lucia, after the island was struck by Hurricane Beulah. Again in 1979, the 1st Battalion of the Trinidad force traveled to St. Vincent to assist with the evacuation of people as a result of the eruption of the Soufriere volcano in the north of the island. Even before this, the short-lived West India Regiment, the military arm of the West Indies Federation (1958-62), was involved in the relief operation after the destruction of Belize (then British Honduras) by Hurricane Hattie in 1981^{iv}. Caribbean defence forces have also assisted Montserrat, beginning in July 1995 as a result of the eruption of the Soufriere volcano. It has therefore been proffered that natural disaster relief — providing assistance and security to victims of floods, landslides and hurricanes, both on the national front and regionally — has remained a key secondary role of all Caribbean defense forces.

In the period of the Cold War, the industrialized countries, including England, mounted civil defense systems and networks to respond to the needs of the civilian authorities in the event of a nuclear attack, and the incipient support of Caribbean militaries to their civilian authorities reflected common practices; however, this disaster management role was unstructured and uncoordinated.

Natural Disasters and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency and Response Agency (CDERA)

During the years 1962 to 1979, the individual countries of the Caribbean managed the aftermath of natural disasters independently. Special powers were given to the police and the military forces on the declaration of a state of emergency. Even as far back as 22 September 1955, Barbados relied on its volunteer regiment and cadet corps after Hurricane Janet^v. On occasions, these countries received help from England/Great Britain, their former colonial government, France in the case of Dominica and others. However, at present when the consequences of a disaster exceed national capabilities, CDERA can mobilize an array of resources to bolster national efforts. Its disaster management includes prevention, preparation and mitigation (Collymore, 2000)

Poncelet states that “concerted regional disaster initiatives in the Caribbean date back to the 1980s”^{vi}. After five devastating hurricanes — David and Frederick (1979) and Allen (1980) in Dominica, Gilbert in Jamaica (1988); and Hugo in Antigua, Montserrat and St. Kitts and Nevis (1989)—leaders of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) shifted their focus from post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation to a broader and more fundamental approach to disaster management.

In 1991, Caribbean governments created several national disaster management agencies and one regional disaster management project called the “Pan Caribbean Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Project.” Recognizing the need to institutionalize the work started by the project in 1991, the Heads of Government of CARICOM established CDERA in September 1991 with headquarters in Barbados.

Most of the economies of the Caribbean depend on tourism and agriculture, two disaster-sensitive industries. Disasters, natural and man-made, including oil spills, along with other environmental concerns, social problems and economic crises, pose a threat to their security^{vii}. Disasters, especially hurricanes, can cause considerable damage to property and loss of life and, by extension, contribute to underdevelopment. However, proactive disaster management can assist the development process and promote stability. And so, the governments generally turn to CDERA and the disciplinary services (military and police because of their physical assets and propensity to get the job done) for help with the conduct of disaster relief missions.

CDERA’s Coordinating Unit has the overall responsibility for the management of the regional response to disaster. It is tasked with mobilizing and organizing outside technical assistance for participating countries interested in disaster management. These include USAID, CIDA, PAHO, the International Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the Christian Fund and other small agencies and individual contributors to the relief fund. Among the many duties it undertakes is its liaison with the disciplinary forces (military and police) of participating countries in the planning, response and recovery stages of any relief operation^{viii}.

Before or immediately following a disaster, the affected country will activate its own Emergency Operations Center to gather information, assess damage and advise its government. Most disasters are handled at the national level.

The Military, Disaster Management and the Caribbean Disaster Response Unit (CDRU)

However, CDERA undertakes the responsibility for coordinating a disaster in conjunction with the Caribbean Disaster Response Unit^{ix}. This Emergency Response Unit, consisting of elements from the regional defence forces and the Regional Security System (RSS), maintains resources (personnel, equipment and supplies) to support regional response to a major disaster or emergency. The RSS, which comprise Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, The Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, St. Christopher and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, coordinate military assistance to relief operations for treaty members. However, the larger territories of the Bahamas, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago do not belong to the treaty organization and respond to request from the receiving state only.

There are obviously different magnitudes to any given disaster, and a local incident within a given Caribbean state is dealt with by the existing National Disaster Organization in the regular operating mode of emergency services and as the need arises in concert with the police and military.

Disasters which take place at the national level which overwhelm the socio-economic structure or capacity of a given state to respond can seek the limited or full activation of the Caribbean Disaster Response Unit, the operational arm of the Regional Response Mechanism. The Unit comprises representatives from the military and police forces within CARICOM and its main responsibility is to provide logistic support for the receipt and dispatch of relief supplies.

When a disaster occurs, the Disaster Unit is asked for its support. CARICOM selects a coordinating Chief of Staff who is the Head of one of the eight defence forces in the country closest to the stricken area. This is done in coordination with the military and police forces of the region^x (Caricom 2003). The Chief of Staff in conjunction with CDERA will appoint a Special Coordinator, usually a senior military officer, who serves as the on-scene Commander of a given disaster. The Chief is responsible for mobilizing the relief and appointing or confirming the director of CDRU. The disciplinary services (military and police) are then mobilized in response to the request by a particular state of CDERA and after consultation between military and police security Chief and the Director of CDERA^{xi}.

Summary, Challenges and Policy Recommendations

In conclusion, with few exceptions, the original mission of the Caribbean military was to provide territorial defence. The policy was a prerequisite for the granting of political independence as imposed by Great Britain. However, relief as a result of natural disasters has become of increasing importance to the security and economic development of the region and the military has become a permanently available resource. This involvement of the military in civil life has helped to positively impact the image and public acceptance of the armed forces. The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA) and the Caribbean Disaster Response Unit both play key roles in this expanded mission.

The military or defence forces of the Caribbean, unlike many of the countries of Africa, Asia and America, were established and have existed under peace-time conditions and so their de-facto missions are

thus confined to operations other than war. Hence, the continuing challenge of the Caribbean military in the early 21st century is how it can appropriately and effectively conduct peace-time domestic missions like disaster management and remain a combat ready force. If the spectrum of roles is to become a viable reality, the Caribbean military will need to be more broadly equipped, trained and properly resourced. As shown in the experience of Hurricane Ivan (2004) in Jamaica, a protocol for humanitarian assistance and an upgrade of its rapid response strategy will likely improve the delivery of disaster management by the military.

ⁱ For purposes of this paper, the term “Caribbean” refers to the English-speaking Caribbean.

ⁱⁱ There are eight regular military organizations or defence forces: Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force, Royal Bahamas Defence Force, Barbados Defence Force, Belize Defence Force, Guyana Defence Force, Jamaica Defence Force, , St. Kitts Nevis Defence Force and the Trinidad and Tobago Defense Force. The Grenada Defence Force and the People’s Revolutionary Army of Grenada as well as the Dominica Defence Force are all defunct. The existing Bermuda Regiment and the Royal Montserrat Defence Force are not considered regular forces.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lt. Col. Nestor Ogilvie, “Getting Ready 21 Years of Preparation,” *Alert: the Magazine of the Jamaica Defence Force*, vol. 11, July 1984: 43-45.

^{iv} Hattie caused enough devastation in Belize City to force the government to relocate to a new capital inland, Belmopan; Dion E. Phillips, “A Look at the West India Regiment – The Military Arm of the West Indies Federation: 50 Years Later, 2008. (Unpublished paper).

^v The Barbados Regiment, headed by Lt. Col. O. Frank Walcott and two of its officers, Lt. Lawrence Quintyne and Lt. Michael Richardson, led in clearing the major motorways from Hastings to St. Lawrence on the south coast of Barbados making them accessible to vehicular traffic “Soldiers work despite loss and damaged houses,” *Advocate-News*, September 28, 1955: 1; “Army called in at Queens Park,” *Advocate-News*, September 1955:1; “Cadet Corps aid regiment in maintaining order,” *Advocate-News*, 28 September 1955:

^{vi} J. L. Poncelet “Reports and Comments: Disaster Management in the Caribbean” *Disasters*, September 1997: 267-279.

^{vii} Ivelaw L. Griffith, *Caribbean Security on the Eve of the 21st Century*. McNair Paper 54, Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defence University, October 1996.

^{viii} Caribbean Community Secretariat. *Agreement Establishing Caribbean Disaster Response Agency*. Georgetown, Guyana, 1991.

^{ix} The CARICOM Disaster Response Unit (CDRU) was formerly called the CARICOM Command and Control Cell. The change was to avoid any confusion between the abbreviated name of the Unit and that of the Caribbean Council of Churches.

^x Caribbean Disaster Response Agency. Public Information about CDERA. Article on-line. Available from [http://www.cderra.org/about .htm](http://www.cderra.org/about.htm)

^{xi} Caribbean Community Secretariat. *Agreement Establishing Caribbean Disaster Response Agency*. Georgetown, Guyana, 1991.

Jeremy Collymore, *Disaster Management in the Caribbean: Possibilities for Critical Policy Links and Consolidation*, Bridgetown: United Nations Environment Program, 2000.