



ASSISTANCE DURING NATURAL DISASTERS

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In an article published recently in *Americas Quarterly* (Fall 2007), Miguel Angel Centeno writes that Latin American armed forces are now playing three major new roles : international peacekeeping, law enforcement and business entrepreneurship. This paper offers the idea that military establishments increasingly will be playing a fourth role in the years to come : assistance in cases of natural disasters.

Many experts believe that natural disasters will be linked increasingly to climate change in the coming decades. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, greenhouse gas emissions will engender new phenomena such as rising sea levels while increasing the intensity and occurrences of phenomena already present such as flooding, tropical cyclones, droughts, desertification, water scarcity and so on. Some of the consequences of climate change have already been felt while others will unfold during the next 30 years. No foreseeable technological solutions will help in preventing the anticipated natural disasters and reducing their probable impacts on populations and societies and infrastructures.

Be they related or not to climate change, there are at least three reasons why armed forces and defence ministries should be preoccupied by natural disasters.

1- They will be asked to intervene because of their superior capacity or because legislation in many Latin American countries establishes the military as a first responder in cases of natural disasters.

2- In many countries of the Americas, they are the only institution with the means to intervene.

There are few other structures or organizations that governments could call upon to act rapidly and efficiently.

3- More intense natural disasters occurring more frequently will necessarily have consequences for peace and stability. Scarcity of food and water with ensuing migrations of population could easily create a significant stress for domestic political institutions. In such instances, they become national security issues.

Up to now, the armed forces of many countries of the Americas have had to intervene in cases of local natural disasters that generally occurred unfrequently. There were a few instances where help came from neighbouring countries. This was the case with Mexico in Central America in the aftermath of hurricanes Mitch, Stan and Wilma. This overall pattern will change in the coming decades as natural disasters will happen more frequently with consequences beyond national borders.

The future context of natural disasters in the Americas consequently requires a regional approach for an more effective intervention, for three reasons at least.

1- Given the similarity in the nature of the phenomena and in the nature of the interventions, exchange of information and combination of expertise should increase the chances for success in terms of saving lives and reducing damages for population and infrastructures.

2- Asymmetry in national capabilities will require assistance from neighbours in cases where small countries are affected by natural disasters.

3- More and more, natural disasters will have regional consequences resulting from migration, transborder flows or economic disruptions.

Let us reflect a little bit more on these elements. In the first case, there are similarities in the occurrences of natural disasters, be they earthquakes, cyclones or flooding, and in the human responses to these occurrences. There is a great amount of experience accumulated by national armed forces on how to cope with such situations. Future intervention would certainly benefit greatly from sharing that experience. This could be a first step demonstrating how regional cooperation in this field could become a very useful instrument. Cooperation could extend from basic exchange of information about how national authorities deal with these situations to building a compendium on best practices and, eventually, testing joint operations.

Secondly, the asymmetry existing in the region means that some countries have an abundance of material, expertise and logistical ability necessary for intervention while others have very limited capabilities to cope with the chain-reaction resulting from a large natural disaster. And even in the case of larger countries, recent events in Mexico and the United States have demonstrated how national armed forces are unprepared to intervene efficiently when natural disasters occur. The case of hurricane Katrina is a particularly sad reminder in that regard.

Consequently, if the military establishments of large countries have not been able to act swiftly and efficiently in cases of large natural disasters it is probable that the armed forces of the smaller countries will not have the resources to react adequately. Military establishments from each country of the Americas should therefore benefit immensely from regional cooperation in dealing with natural disasters.

A third element of the rationale for regional cooperation in this area is that, more and more, natural disasters will have impacts extending beyond state borders. The « football war » of 1969 between Honduras and El Salvador is an example of how migration can bring about a local or regional conflict. But even discarding alarmist considerations, it is easy to envisage that huge volumes of displaced persons or migration of people trying to escape from the harsh conditions of a post-disaster situation could generate significant border stress and/or economic disruption in the bordering states.

Consequently, there is a strong logical rationale in favour of regional cooperation as a pattern or framework for more efficient intervention in the case of natural disasters and better management of post-disasters conditions. But is a collaborative effort around the notion of *regional environmental security* a realistic possibility on a hemisphere-wide basis? Recent sub-regional initiatives such as the Regional Intelligence Center in which Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay work together to address criminal activity in the Tri-Border Area show that sub-regional cooperation is possible in some instances. But it would be unrealistic at this point in time to envision the establishment of a strong hemispheric cooperation framework for the coordination of assistance in cases of natural disasters.

Regional cooperation in that area must be developed in an incremental way. The process could be initiated by taking the following steps.

1- Creation of a databank on past experiences.

Given that there are similarities in assistance provided in cases of natural disasters and because armed forces had to intervene regularly in such circumstances in the past, one first useful step would be to gather information concerning best practices, but also on recurrent difficulties that the military had to face in that context. The exchange of information concerning national experiences could be done through a virtual secretariat whose functions would be to obtain the necessary information and make it available to stakeholders in a clear and effective manner.

2- Adoption of protocols for regional cooperation.

Because natural disasters will probably become more frequent and more extensive in the coming years, the demands on national armed forces in occurrences of natural disasters could become quite significant. In many cases, resources are going to be stretched to the limit. It makes sense consequently to think ahead and envisage a

framework for regional cooperation. That could take the form of protocols that could be prepared beforehand to plan intervention of neighbouring armed forces that seek to provide assistance.

The contents of the protocols could be based on past experiences at regional cooperation in cases of natural disasters and would seek to establish precisely elements such as, for example, the chain of command, type of resources mobilised for each particular situation, transit of people, and material, duration, etc. The contents of the protocols would naturally have to be adapted to types of natural disasters and particular sub-regional contexts.

3- Regional exercises of assistance.

It is difficult to assess clearly the possibility of such an occurrence, but it should be possible to envisage at some point in time the conduct of small- scale joint exercises. At a minimal level, that could take the form of organizing the provision of food and material. At a further stage, it could involve joint exercises between specialized units.

Among the possibilities for regional cooperation between national armed forces, assistance in the case of natural disasters has to be considered a privileged domain because of its non-ideological, non conflictual aspects. Given that every country is affected by natural disasters and that the impact of such disasters could be reduced by a combined effort, it would seem that regional environmental security could be a most appropriate issue around which to build future regional cooperation.

