

Final Research Paper

Should the US Military's role be expanded to provide humanitarian support to needy nations on a more routine basis?

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Abstract

Should the US military's role be expanded to provide humanitarian support to needy nations on a more routine basis? I propose that the benefits for this increase in utilization greatly outweigh the negatives. The intended outcome of this increase in scope for the military would be two fold. First, the experience gained by military personnel would be invaluable in preparation for wartime duty. Second, US forces engaging in non-combat operations and providing aid and assistance to other nations can only improve and bolster the US's image in the worldwide political climate.

To assess the argument of increasing US military participation in international humanitarian assistance, I predominately used historical research of military involvement and conducted personal interviews with members of Army organizations tasked with training and implementing humanitarian assistance and relief operations.

The results confirm that the US military is the most capable and ready force to administer humanitarian aid to suffering countries. Cooperation between Non-Governmental Organizations and the military is a must for promoting effective distribution of aid and relief to the needy. Stereotypes and a lack of understanding between the two organizations challenge this cooperation. Proactive training modules have been developed by both organizations in an effort to educate personnel on interacting with their civilian and military counterparts. The more effectively the two groups work together, the more successful relief operations will be when needed.

As the wealthiest nation on earth, the US provides more funding in support of foreign aid than any other country. By funding programs through the United Nations and US Department of State, the US is able to positively impact poverty and disease worldwide. Bringing to bear the power of the military in this effort is not only beneficial to the military itself; it is the right thing to do.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to favorably argue the merits of increasing the United States military involvement in international humanitarian relief operations. Traditionally, the use of the US military has included medical, transportation, engineering, and civil affairs support to provide humanitarian assistance to nations suffering from natural disaster or economic collapse. I will argue that the military's role should be expanded to provide this same type of humanitarian support to needy nations on a more routine basis. The intended outcome of this increase in scope for the military would be two fold. First, the experience gained by military personnel would be invaluable in preparation for wartime duty. Simulations at home cannot replicate working on the ground in remote locations under austere conditions facing actual crisis. Second, US forces engaging in non-combat operations and providing aid and assistance to other nations can only improve and bolster the US's image in the worldwide political climate. Aside from the obvious benefit to the people receiving the aid, an unintended outcome could also be to counter international terrorist allegations that US's only motivation to assist countries in need is driven by an "imperialist" agenda to politically democratize nations as repayment for support.

Introduction

In the 227-year history of the United States, the government has called upon the military establishment in times of disaster to render aid domestically and internationally through use of its manpower and specialization in areas of medicine and civil affairs. The term disaster typically evokes images of tremendous damage to materiel and infrastructure as well as human suffering resulting from some quickly occurring event.¹ A more practical description is one of disruption to a social structure in turn preventing operation of its essential functions.² Humanitarian relief for natural disasters usually results from fires, floods, storms, and earthquakes as well as famine and epidemic.

These experiences gave the military invaluable training in providing medical care in remote areas typically in the hours directly after a natural disaster occurred. There are hundreds of historical examples where US military forces provided humanitarian assistance to other counties. A few of the notable examples include Vera Cruz, Mexico in 1914, Iranian earthquake relief in 1962, and response to the devastating 1999 earthquake in Turkey.

The Vera Cruz operation began as an incursion by US forces into the Mexican city of Vera Cruz in 1914 to occupy the city's port with the intention of influencing the Mexican government to democratically reform. One of the first missions was to enforce sanitation regulations because the city was swept by numerous epidemics such as yellow fever, malaria, and smallpox.³ The US forces were credited with lowering the

¹ "Disaster" - implies great or sudden misfortune that results in loss of life, property, etc. or that is ruinous to an undertaking. Guralnik, David B. Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition, The World Publishing Company, New York and Cleveland, 1972.

² Foster, Gaines M. "The Demands of Humanity: Army Medical Disaster Relief", Office of Medical History, Office of the Surgeon General, <http://history.amedd.army.mil/booksdocs/misc/disaster/>, Accessed: November 2, 2003, p. 4.

³ Boot, Max. The Savage Wars of Peace – Small Wars and the Rise of American Power, Basic Books, 2002, p. 154.

death rate of city residents by enforcing proper sanitation methods such as garbage removal from the streets.⁴ While the assistance provided by US forces resulted from a hostile incursion, the positive affects to the city's residents in terms of sanitation and healthcare are most notable. In 1962, the US military provided medical relief to Iran after a devastating earthquake. Within hours of the event, US teams, flown in from Europe, were on the ground accessing damage and coordinating relief operations. Within one week US personnel transported, assembled, and activated a field hospital that ultimately treated 182 victims.⁵ Of those 182 patients, 75 required surgery to repair fractures and internal injuries.⁶ Additional public health efforts were made to address delousing and immunization of residents of the affected region.⁷ It is also important to note US sensitivity to local customs. In deference to Islamic customs, the military constructed all latrines at the hospital to face south.⁸ The military's teams and field hospital treated victims of the earthquake that the Iranian infrastructure would have been unable to support.

Today, the military continues to stand ready to respond in times of international humanitarian relief. In 1999, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) coordinated military assistance for earthquake relief in Turkey. The US Navy and Air Force provided medical care and airlift of vital supplies including 5,500 tents, 200 portable latrines, generators and water purification units capable of producing enough clean water for 27,000 people daily.⁹ The US military worked with local authorities to evaluate "shelter, health, water and sanitation assessments; help coordinate US military transportation and distribution of relief supplies" to the population.¹⁰ The contribution of equipment and transportation resources by US military forces greatly mitigated the suffering of the Turkish people affected by this disaster.

Over the generations these contributions by the military have proven to be a tremendous benefit not only to the military itself, in terms of training and exercising of logistics capability, but also to the suffering country by providing needed care quickly and professionally. The military has gained tremendous knowledge and experience in disaster relief specifically in the areas of medical research and civil engineering. The lessons learned from these operations have helped to shape military policy and procedures for reacting to similar events. Each event the military is involved in not only helps the citizens of the country in need, but helps the military to function better. These experiences have been of the utmost importance to rounding out the military's ability to perform both peace and wartime missions.

In the latter half of the 20th century the increasing role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) in humanitarian relief operations began to reduce the military's

⁴ IBID.

⁵ Foster, Gaines M. "The Demands of Humanity: Army Medical Disaster Relief", Office of Medical History, Office of the Surgeon General, <http://history.amedd.army.mil/booksdocs/misc/disaster/>, Accessed: November 2, 2003, p. 158.

⁶ IBID, p. 158.

⁷ IBID, p. 159.

⁸ IBID, p. 158.

⁹ The United States Information Agency, "Fact Sheet, White House Outlines Earthquake Relief Efforts in Turkey", White House Press Release, September 2, 1999, <http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/3a81e21068ec1871c1256633003c1c6f/361154b0182ab7c0852567e000748959?OpenDocument>, Accessed: November 2, 2003.

¹⁰ IBID.

role in times of crisis. A typical NGO is a private group specializing in one of the various humanitarian and disaster relief efforts that were formally filled by the military. The relationships between NGOs and military organizations never developed into a friendly partnership. Tension, driven by ideology, goals, and politics, between these organizations has made cooperation and communication difficult.

Although the military's role in humanitarian efforts is somewhat diminished, today the Army Reserve and National Guard continue to perform important roles in humanitarian relief during scheduled deployments to Central and South America. Specializing in civil engineering and medical care, units spend two weeks of annual training in Latin America providing tremendous support to host nations by improving water treatment plants and sanitation networks, medical triage in remote areas, and public health education. Composed of citizen soldiers, the Reserve Component (RC) brings talents and specialties from the civilian sector to bear. This type of relief, though short duration, goes a long way in improving skills and experience for the service members as well as fostering a relationship of cooperation between US and foreign governments. The US military stands ready to lend its support to stricken countries in need of care, but recently is only called upon in to support events of epic proportion such as earthquake and hurricane relief. I contend increasing this type of short duration but scheduled relief would be a beneficial mission to US military forces in terms of experience gained and would further improve international relations with other nations.

This paper asserts the military should play a greater role in humanitarian relief operations on a routine basis. The resources the military bring to bear such as heavy airlift for movement of supplies is critical during planned deployments overseas as well as in times of emergency. Additionally, the experience gained by servicemen and women from operating in remote, austere surroundings will pay great dividends in support of service members in time of war.

Methodology

To assess the argument of increasing US military participation in international humanitarian assistance, I predominately used historical research of military involvement and conducted personal interviews with members of Army organizations tasked with training and implementing humanitarian assistance and relief operations. I analyzed historical vignettes of military involvement in support of natural disaster relief to determine what "good" and "bad" was achieved or realized. Telephone interviews were conducted with Army representatives from the Army National Guard Bureau and the National Training Center located at Ft. Irwin, California to gauge the steps the Army is taking to train and prepare for humanitarian operations and interaction with civilian agencies during relief operations. The telephone interview with the Ft. Irwin representative consisted of asking questions pertaining to current training programs for units training at Ft. Irwin for deployments overseas. The interview with the National Guard Bureau representative focused on relating his personal experiences from working in the RC coordination group Ft. Clayton, Panama. His responsibilities included coordination of Army Reserve and Army National Guard annual training programs in the

Americas. Also, I drew on personal experience as a member of the US military to lend perspective on what would be considered realistic and useful training. I combined the results of my analysis and included the information gained from the interview to draw conclusions on the successfulness of this proposal. Finally, I emphasized the potential benefits of increased military involvement in the context of international public policy.

Results

The findings of this paper clearly support the thesis of increasing the US military's role in support of international humanitarian relief. In the preponderance of cases, the relief provided to foreign nations both in times of crisis and on scheduled deployments resulted in positive outcomes for the host nation and the forces called upon. Most military members found this type of humanitarian mission rewarding both personally and professionally through the contribution of their military specialty to alleviate suffering. The military is still called upon in times of significant destruction caused by natural disaster or conflict. Foreign nations and NGOs request federal assistance through the Department of State's USAID Office, which in turn works with the Department of Defense to task appropriate forces based upon the requested need.¹¹ In most cases the request is for logistical support to move critical supplies and equipment into the affected area by air. However, depending on the level of need identified by the requesting organization, manpower in terms of medical specialists and civil engineers will deploy to render assistance.

The relationship between NGOs and the military is a delicate balance of working towards the same goal and dealing with conflicting political ideals. NGOs are typically comprised of private and non-profit organizations seeking to raise public awareness of a variety of humanitarian issues such as refugee assistance and landmine clearing. The role of the NGO on these issues can conflict with the military's assistance due to lack of understanding and communication between organizations. To help alleviate this situation, the UN published a training module for NGOs to use when working with military organizations to aid in facilitating understanding and cooperation between the two.¹² The module goes into in depth descriptions of military characteristics, organization, capability, and terminology to help NGO personnel work effectively with military organizations.¹³ For the military, training for operations conducted with NGOs is becoming more common. At the military's National Training Center at Ft. Irwin, California, simulations and scenarios involving NGO interface are trained and evaluated as a part of a unit's exercise.¹⁴ Although improving, communications between NGOs and the military are far from perfect. Poor communication between an NGO and US military commanders in Afghanistan in the summer of 2002 led to a potentially dangerous incident. Military commanders placed their personnel in civilian attire to distribute humanitarian supplies in an effort to minimize exposure of the troops to attack

¹¹ The United States Agency for International Development, "Humanitarian Assistance, Denton", http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/private_voluntary_cooperation/denton.html, Accessed: November 12, 2003.

¹² The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Working with the Military", <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/+AwwBmekD518wwwnwwwwwwwhFqhT0yfEtFqnp1xcAFqhT0yfEcFqSidGAoDtaioBraBrnaMo coBwGODzmxwwwwww1FqmRbZ/opensdoc.pdf>, Accessed: November 2, 2003, p.1.

¹³ IBID.

¹⁴ Ensign, Mark. Reserve Component liaison group, Nation Training Center, Ft. Irwin, California, Telephone Interview, November 18, 2003.

while rendering assistance. While a seemingly harmless strategy to the military community, the NGO's felt it put their personnel in harm by blurring the lines between who is a NGO worker and who is a military member.¹⁵ In this instance, if military commanders had properly understood their role in delivering humanitarian assistance and communicated their plan to the local NGO representative before starting, this crisis could have been avoided. This is one example where miscommunication, not only delayed delivery of aid, but potentially placed noncombatant aid workers in danger.

The goals of NGOs and the US military, while providing humanitarian assistance, are the same – relieve suffering. The US is one of the most generous countries in the world. The US leads the world in providing economic aid; in 2003 President Bush budgeted \$11.4 billion in economic assistance for foreign nations.¹⁶ The military has the means to deliver aid (strategic lift, logistical infrastructure, deployable medical capability) unrivaled by any NGO. It would appear, from my perspective, a natural fit to increase the military's role in humanitarian relief.

The US must be sensitive though to local customs and political climate, if and when, their humanitarian role is expanded. In many areas that could most benefit from the military's expertise, the local people may be mistrustful of the military – any military. Many of these poor and impoverished nations have a history of corruption and brutality by their own military. The US military would have to ensure that there is no perception that they, in any way, acted in the same manner. Many NGOs feel the same way, arguing that the lines between "helpful humanitarian and enemy interloper" have become "blurred".¹⁷ The first step in improving the image of the US overseas may come from helping local populations not to fear the military. These types of situations and stereotypes can be avoided by training and experience in working together on this common goal.

The RCs of the Army (Army Reserve and Army National Guard) provide the bulk of scheduled humanitarian relief operations conducted by the Army. Typically scheduled during the summer months, Reservists and Guardsmen routinely deploy to the Americas and Africa for two to three week Annual Training periods to render aid to stricken countries.¹⁸ Civil Affairs units, which are typically composed of members with specialized skills such as medicine, engineering, and government infrastructure will deploy to remote and impoverished areas of the world to provide inoculation against disease and repair facilities critical to good health such as wells and water treatment plants.¹⁹ These servicemen and women serve as representatives and ambassadors promoting healthcare and sanitation to counties and populations that might otherwise be

¹⁵ Interaction, Relief Web website, "Humanitarian leaders ask White House to review policy allowing American soldiers to conduct humanitarian relief programs in civilian clothes", <http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/f303799b16d2074285256830007fb33f/a5434df6dbd62ca485256b8f006c3bd6?OpenDocument>. Accessed: November 2, 2003.

¹⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, "Terrorism: Questions & Answers, Foreign Aid", www.terrorismanswers.com/policy/foreignaid.html. Accessed November 30, 2003.

¹⁷ Christian Science Monitor, Relief Web website, "Relief groups refuse protection of US military", <http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/s/1DFCE274E531EDFCC1256CF100469520>. Accessed: November 14, 2003.

¹⁸ Skivo, Anthony. Army National Guard Coordination Group, Ft. Clayton, Panama, 1996-1999, Telephone Interview, November 21, 2003.

¹⁹ IBID.

influenced by violent elements out of desperation. The work performed by the part-time soldiers of the RC shows how the full-time military can be leveraged in similar missions.

Discussion

The US's successful use of RC units to provide routine medical and civil support around the world demonstrates the potential positive impacts to third world nations in terms of health care and disease control. During the summer of 2003 Army Reservists participating in Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa delivered over 15,000 doses of polio vaccine to the children of Ethiopia. Coordinated through the World Health Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund, Rotary International and others, the 478th Civil Affairs Battalion deployed for a seven day period providing medical care to numerous villages and communities. This mission by the 478th not only provides lifesaving care to the region, but also offers an "improved quality of life, welfare and health of the Ethiopian economy" and deters "terrorist organizations" from operating.²⁰ The commander of the 478th is quoted as saying "We are like ambassadors, representing not only the US military, but the United States as a whole".²¹ An interpreter escorting the 478th is quoted as saying, "Providing assistance in health, education, veterinary treatment or military training, helps local Ethiopians remain very positive about the American presence in Ethiopia".²² The examples of the 478th's efforts are compelling evidence of how US forces may contribute in a positive light to America's reputation in foreign lands. This type of peaceful foreign support in times other than when disasters strike supports the notion that further involvement by US forces in these types of humanitarian missions will only promote the willingness of the American government to aid foreign nations.

This type of aid not only promotes America's role as a humanitarian nation, it also aids in protecting the US mainland against potential outbreaks of disease and illness. It is arguable that attacking a disease or outbreak of illness at the point of discovery will greatly influence the spread of the disease to other regions or nations of the world. As seen by the SARS outbreak during the summer of 2003, the capability of individuals to freely travel internationally places communities or countries on the other side of the world at risk of infection or exposure to new and emerging diseases. The cost to the US government to support increased use of military forces for humanitarian assistance missions would be miniscule compared to the potential negative impacts the economy of a plague or epidemic spread across the US. Safeguarding the American population from exposure to disease and epidemic is more than an economic concern; it is a vital component to the national security of the US.

The actual on the ground experience gained by service members in these types of humanitarian roles cannot be simulated or gained through exercises alone. The time available for conducting 2-3 week deployments in these roles is easily scheduled into military training plans when coordination is made in advance. Typically, active military

²⁰ Army Reserve News, "Polio Vaccine for Ethiopia", Internet Article, http://www4.army.mil/USAR/news/boots_10.php. Accessed: November 28, 2003.

²¹ IBID.

²² IBID.

units conduct routine training exercises quarterly in training areas located within the local region requiring movement of equipment and personnel to a "field" location. With the addition of strategic lift assets, these types of short duration exercises could easily take place in third world nations in need of assistance. Today, USAID actively works with international relief organizations and foreign governments who request US military support for humanitarian relief operations. Typically, these requests only come in response to major disasters or after military conflict. With the assistance and oversight of the USAID, active forces could participate in scheduled, coordinated exercises to address rehabilitating civil infrastructure and provide medical screening as well as provide inoculation against illness.

Arguments against use of the military in humanitarian relief operations are based upon a premise that it is a misuse of soldiers and military capabilities are unfounded in my opinion. As noted before, the military has a precedent of assisting foreign nations in time of need, so arguments surrounding appropriate mission assignment are unfounded. Perhaps, a more appropriate argument against this proposal is the high operating tempo that all of the military, both active and reserve, is experiencing in response to the Global War on Terrorism. Indeed, much of the active and reserve force has seen multiple deployments overseas since the terrorist attacks against the US in September 2001. Questions about troop morale associated with wartime deployment are main points of discussion in the US media and on Capital Hill. However, one of the key ingredients to soldier moral is providing relevant and meaningful training. By reviewing where the national interests lie, it would be possible to ease the long-term deployment burden on the military. Currently, the US Army alone has personnel stationed in over 10 regions worldwide.²³ A large percentage of these forces are in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, we still have a major presence in Bosnia, Kosovo, Sinai, and Djibouti with ongoing peacekeeping and international monitoring commitments.²⁴ If these commitments are curtailed and handed off to the international community, it would free up units and personnel for these proposed scheduled, shorter duration deployments. Especially in RC units, where personnel must leave their civilian lives and jobs for long term deployment. A scheduled short-term deployment would not only serve as useful training, but also be a huge boost for morale. Strategically, having an increased presence of the military in these non-conflict roles, working with NGOs and trusted by the indigenous people, would go a long way in bolstering the image of the US overseas. This in turn would/could help stem the tide of international terrorism by combating true terrorist propaganda of US "imperialism". The military and their NGO counterparts must be sensitive to local customs to ensure our aid is viewed in the best possible light.

As mentioned earlier, many vignettes exist supporting the usefulness of the military in this role. The Iranian operation taking place in 1962 clearly demonstrated the capability of the military to respond to crisis and provide critical medical support to a stricken country. The use of RC military units in the Americas has proven instrumental

²³ Cable News Network website, "Major US troop deployments",
<http://www.cnn.com/interactive/maps/world/fullpage.troop.deployments/world.index.html>,
Accessed: November 29, 2003.

²⁴ IBID.

in maintaining critical infrastructure such as roads and sanitation facilities. Without the use of the US military in this role, the populations in these countries would certainly suffer health wise.

The military capabilities to contribute to humanitarian relief are tremendous. Much of the logistical and support structure is composed of units and organizations whose primary mission, in peace and war, is to provide essential services such as medical, dental, sanitation, and construction capabilities. Military specialists include skills in the areas of reverse osmosis water purification have the capability to produce thousands of gallons of potable water daily. The capabilities found in the military to move large quantities of bulk cargo and supplies are unparalleled in the civilian community. The military's inherent capability to project personnel and equipment by air to all corners of the globe is an asset that must be leveraged further. This type of logistics capability is often requested by the NGOs themselves through USAID's Denton Program to support their numerous ongoing relief causes.²⁵ Provided with excess space available on military cargo planes, this program transports varieties of goods from medical supplies to farm equipment. During fiscal year 2002, over 430,000 pounds of humanitarian goods were delivered to 13 countries through this program.²⁶ Expansion of programs like this can only benefit the NGOs, the local people receiving aid, the US military, and ultimately the US itself.

Conclusions

The US military is the most capable and ready force to administer humanitarian aid to suffering countries. Composed of four branches of armed services, the US military has trained personnel and specialized equipment to respond anywhere in the world on short notice. Over the last 30 years, the military forces have increasingly been called upon in times of crisis and disaster to lend a hand in relief operations. With the exception of the scheduled RC Annual Training exercises, a decreasing number of the military forces have seen duty in support of non-disaster, humanitarian operations. The NGO and military communities continue to work together to improve communications and understanding of their respective organizations in an effort to minimize misunderstandings and streamline relief efforts. Proactive training modules have been developed by both organizations in an effort to educate personnel on interacting with their civilian and military counterparts. The more effectively the two groups work together, the more successful relief operations will be when needed.

The benefits to the military through involvement in additional humanitarian operations greatly outweigh the negatives. Through scheduled, coordinated deployments and exercises to needy countries, the military can administer aid in remote impoverished regions gaining real world experience that could not be effectively simulated at home. Exposed to remote and impoverished areas, military specialists in medicine and civil affairs would actually put their skills to work helping people in need.

²⁵ The United States Agency for International Development, "Humanitarian Assistance, Denton", http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/private_voluntary_cooperation/denton.html, Accessed: November 12, 2003.

²⁶ IBID.

The benefits to the military in terms of realistic training are important but also the personal satisfaction of helping people in need would positively influence the morale of the service member.

The use of the military in the role of humanitarian relief promotes a positive image of the US in foreign nations. Providing medical care and infrastructure support to promote a healthier society helps to reduce terrorist breeding grounds by encouraging a healthy population which in turn influences a strong economy. While remaining cognizant of local customs, military members could effectively work side by side with NGO representatives to teach healthy practices while helping revitalize infrastructure when needed.

As the wealthiest nation on earth, the US provides more funding in support of foreign aid than any other country. By funding programs through the United Nations and US Department of State, the US is able to positively impact poverty and disease worldwide. Bringing to bear the power of the military in this effort is not only beneficial to the military itself; it is the right thing to do.

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