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Armed Forces in Disaster Management in India: Need for Improving Civil - Military Coordination

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ABSTRACT: Armed Forces (AF) in India have been very frequently called upon by Civil Administration to provide assistance in rescue and relief work during natural calamities. However, it has been noticed, time and again, that the performance of the AF could have been much better had there been closer and more intimate coordination between the civil administration and the AF.

The main objectives of this research were to identify the areas where the lack of proper coordination, in recent cases, has adversely affected the performance of the AF, and to suggest measures to overcome the same. Two instances where such lack of coordination has been seriously noticed are in the cases of the floods in J&K (2014) and Chennai (2015).

To study the case of floods in J&K, a visit to Srinagar, the most badly affected area, was undertaken, in Jun 2015, to have a direct interaction and interview with officials and victims. A Questionnaire was given to the victims (130) & officials (30). The Army's After Action Report was also studied. The findings indicate that the civil administration was totally absent when the disaster occurred and also, there was no organisation to manage the large amount of relief material that kept arriving at Srinagar airport.

In the case of the floods in Chennai, details were obtained from media reports and telephonic conversations with officials involved in the relief and rescue work. Army columns were kept waiting for long hours without any definite orders where to be deployed, although large areas were still inundated and the public were in dire need of rescue and relief.

This research shows that had there been greater and closer coordination between the local civil administration and AF, optimum outputs in shorter time frames could have been achieved in the all important relief and rescue operations.

KEYWORDS: Armed Forces, Civil Administration, Coordination, Natural Disasters.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian armed forces have always done a commendable job when called in aid of civil authorities, especially in the wake of natural calamities or 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, more often than not, they are the core of the government response capacity and tend to be the first responders of the Government in a major disaster. 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 Sikkim earthquake (2011), Uttarakhand floods (2013), J&K floods (2014) and the recent floods in Chennai (Dec 2015).

Very intimate and effective coordination between civil administration and the armed forces is essential for optimum utilisation of the large resources of the armed forces during disasters. Aid to civil authority in cases of disasters has to be viewed as a special emergency and tackled with full enthusiasm and the *synergistic efforts of both the civil*

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administration and the armed forces. It is essential that both, the civil administration and the AF be aware of each other's capabilities and limitations and work with the highest degree of coordination. This research aimed at highlighting areas that merit greater coordination between the civil administration and the AF during management of natural disasters.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The case of floods in J&K (2014) has been studied by analysing questionnaires answered by officials and victims, interviews with concerned officials and study of other official records. The study of the floods in Chennai (2015) has been done through interviews with concerned officials and analysis of media reports.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The main objectives of the research were:

- To identify areas where lack of proper coordination adversely affected the performance of the AF in the cases of the floods in J&K (2014) and Chennai (2015).
- To suggest measures to overcome such issues in future cases of disaster management.

IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Alok (2008) highlights the need to carry out a reappraisal of the AF in aid to civil authorities, especially in contingencies relating to disaster management. He has stated that aid to civil authorities, in cases of disasters, has to be viewed as a special emergency and tackled with full enthusiasm and with synergistic efforts of both, the civil administration and the AF. It would be prudent for the civil administration to keep the AF formations/units in the picture of the developing crises and even warn them to remain in an advanced state of readiness to avoid any loss of time in deployment. The AF units should not be used for menial tasks or as just a labour force. From the study it has been learnt that the relationship between the civil administration and the AF needs to be one of trust and faith leading to just, selfless service.

Bhaskar Rao (2009) has highlighted the Principles of Employment of AF, stressing the importance of regular liaison and coordination, advance planning and training, integration of all available resources, early derequisitioning, etc.

Padmanabhan and Arora (2009) have stated that there is a great need to understand the civil-military coordination procedures and modalities in complex emergencies and disasters. They have observed that the AF should strengthen the local administration rather than taking over their function, although usually there is always a complete breakdown of the local administration and the affected community tends to look towards the AF for every nature of relief. The military must remain subordinate to the civil administration even during emergencies.

Satish Kumar (2012) has stated that the present system of requisitioning military aid during disasters is very time consuming as the clearance has to be obtained from the Central Government, even though the AF units may be co-located in the same station where the emergency occurs. He has also highlighted that the AF are autonomous in character and do not appreciate civil interference. The AF units need to be given a free hand in conduct of rescue and relief operations and no political interference is entertained.

Mahalingam (2013) has stated that the AF are, per-se, not trained or equipped for disaster management. It is the leadership, discipline and culture, developed within the forces that have made them versatile, with imaginative use of their military equipment, skills and their administrative abilities. He has questioned the appointment of senior bureaucrats to oversee disaster relief operations and their reluctance to work on weekends even during emergencies.

Fischer (2011) has stated that the civil administration needs to analyse how well the capabilities of the AF are used within the larger operation. The primary responsibility always lies with the civil agencies at the local, state and national levels.

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V. FINDINGS

J&K Floods (2014). 30 copies of the Questionnaire were distributed to various Officials who had participated in this operation. An analysis of their response (19 No's) to the issues relevant to the Research Topic (Civil – Military Coordination) is covered below.

Table 1- Details of Respondents from whom Responses were Received

SNo	Service	Numbers	%
1.	Civil (State/Central) Administration	05	26
2.	Police/PMF	04	21
3.	Armed Forces	06	32
4.	Prominent Citizens	03	16
5.	Others	01	05
	Total	19	100

Maximum responses were received from personnel of the Civil Administration and the Armed Forces as they were the main participants in the Disaster Rescue stage.

Table 2 – Degree of Civil-Military Coordination

(VS = Very satisfied, S = Satisfied, N = Neutral, DS = Dissatisfied, VDS = Very dissatisfied)

SNo	Issue	VS	S	N	DS	VDS	Total
1.	Coordination						
(a)	During Normal Time	-	02	04	08	05	19
(b)	Disaster Build Up Stage	-	05	06	05	03	19
(c)	Conduct of Rescue/Relief	03	08	06	02	-	19
2.	Preparation of AF						
(a)	Knowledge of Local Areas	06	05	03	03	02	19
(b)	In Know of Larger Picture	10	06	03	-	-	19

There was lack of adequate coordination during 'Normal Time' and even when the 'Disaster was Building Up'. However, once the civil administration recovered from its initial paralysis, the coordination was good. The Armed

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Forces should have greater knowledge of the local areas. It will improve their effectiveness in such 'Disaster' situations.

Important Observations (J&K Floods (2014)).

1. There was a total absence of the civil administration for the first 96 hours. The Chief Minister of J&K, Shri Omar Abdullah, had stated that he was helpless as none of his State Ministers were available to take control of the situation, as they themselves were badly affected and even needed to be rescued.
2. Even though the Army Cantonment (Badami Bagh), and its surrounding areas was also badly affected by the rising flood waters, the local Army Commander, became, defacto, in charge of the entire initial rescue and relief operations, working in close coordination directly with the State Governor and Chief Minister.
3. All the Committees that had been planned to function in such a situation were actually non-existent. The civil administration was caught totally unaware and unprepared, even though there were adequate inputs and warnings of the rising levels of water in the Jhelum River.
4. As the gravity of the situation became known to the outside world, relief material, of all sorts, started arriving in mammoth proportions at the Srinagar Airport. There being no civil administration to manage this large quantity of relief material, most of it rotted in the rains and became useless, especially food items. Army units had to be deployed to take control of this task also.
5. Coordination of rescue and relief operations in areas affected by insurgency requires very intimate interaction with the civil administration. There were instances, especially in Down Town Srinagar, where the Army does not operate, the local population, though badly in need of rescue and relief assistance, but due to pressures from insurgent groups, obstructed the Army vehicles and boats carrying relief material for them. Stones were pelted on these Army columns. There was no protection given to these Army columns from the civil police.
6. People who were rescued by the AF and brought to a safe area, had no means of transport to go to other places, nor was there any central places where the civil administration had arranged for temporary or tented accommodation, with medical facilities.

Chennai Floods (Dec 2015)

1. The AF, which had rescued thousands of marooned residents, faced critical coordination problems with the local administration at the ground level, resulting in delayed action in some places. The unpreparedness of the local agencies, including Chennai Corporation, in giving appropriate directions to the Army came to light when media persons accompanied the rescue teams in several places.
2. For instance, despite waters fast receding at T. Nagar, an Army column was called in for rescue there. An Army officer supervising the rescue operations stated, "When we reached the area, many parts had only ankle-deep water. The inputs we got were that several other areas had severe flooding where our boats and men could be of immense help. We waited for five hours without any major work at T. Nagar."
3. In Velachery, a Corporation official said on that he came to know of the Army's arrival just half an hour before they reached the locality. Since multiple operations drained batteries on their search lights, the forces asked for the equipment — which was not organised.
4. The troops were in a spot as the rescued residents began questioning the complete lack of transport facilities when they were brought out of the flooded areas at 11 p.m. The Army men then requested cars plying in the area to drop the

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residents. A few Good Samaritans obliged, going out of their way to take pregnant women and the elderly to faraway places.

5. At the State level, the photos of 100 soldiers from Hyderabad, waiting for over 10 hours for instructions from the Tamil Nadu government as Chennai sank, showed the civil administration in very poor light. It indicated that bureaucrats did not have the freedom to act. Even during natural disasters, they had to be given instructions because they are used to that pattern of governance now. They expect 'clearance' for everything and a lot of time is wasted as officers look up to the CM for every small decision.

6. Local politicians were playing dirty because the State administration was missing in action. The political executive washed its hands of the matter the minute the forces landed. It became the Army's job to ensure that relief and rescue operations went smoothly. However, the State government did not want to lose political mileage.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

There has been a perceptible improvement in coordination between the armed forces units / formations and local civil administration in the last few years. But, much remains to be done to plug loopholes and achieve the desired synergy between the local civil and military set-ups, to optimise the outcome of the effort in case of a disaster. Important points are as given below. These points, though very relevant, are nothing new. However, as noticed in the Research, they need to be reiterated, stressed upon and need to be very seriously applied by responsible political leaders, committed officials and staff. The underlying principle should be *SELFLESS SERVICE TO FELLOW CITIZENS*:

1. Scenario Building. There is a need to carry out an exercise of 'scenario building'. This will help visualise various scenarios which may emerge in the region to enable listing out emergencies and contingencies. The civil administration needs to carry out a self-reappraisal of capabilities to be able to identify contingencies necessitating assistance from the armed forces in disaster relief.
2. Joint Meetings. Regular joint meetings at the highest levels need to be held. In normal times these could be on a quarterly basis. As the weather turns bad, as in the case of onset of monsoons, these joint meetings should be held more frequently, may be once every 3 - 4 weeks. These meetings should be shared at the highest levels in the State capitals, either by the Chief Minister him/herself, or the Dy Chief Minister, and should include the Chief Secretary, the local Army/Navy/Air Force Commander, the DG Police, the Chief Engineers, DG Fire Services and Home Guards, Communication Secretary, Chief health officer and such senior members who may be necessary. Similar high level joint meetings should be held at the District levels. Updated contact details of all personnel should be available to all members, both at the policy formulation levels and at the operational levels. Two levels of such Coordination Committees should be set up, like a Team A and a Team B, to ensure redundancy in decision making also. A senior officer should be earmarked as the Liaison Officer, from both sides.
3. Early Information of Developing Situation. The armed forces are usually involved in the training and operational preparedness for their primary role. Therefore, the civil administration should ensure that the local armed forces units and formations are kept in the picture of a developing disaster situation and all disaster management related information is shared with them.
4. Scope of Assistance to be Provided by the AF. The local AF Commander should be spelt out the broad nature of the assistance required, including where, when and to what extent. The quantum of the effort required should be left to the AF Commander. Whatever assistance may be required by the AF from the civil administration in terms of temporary accommodation, local guides, any special communication/technical equipment, etc, should be provided. Specific demarcation of Areas of Responsibility between civil administration and the AF should be done.
5. Identification of Very Important Areas. All agencies should be aware of these important areas and the need to guard them.

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6. Inventory of Resources. An updated inventory of all resources with different agencies, along with locations & quantities needs to be maintained. All equipment needs to be periodically inspected to ensure that it is in serviceable condition.
7. Identification of Suitable Areas. Suitable open and vacant areas need to be identified, and data maintained where rescued persons can be guided to, for necessary medical and relief aid. Adequate means of transporting people to these areas needs to be catered for. Details of rescued persons should be effectively maintained. Necessary codification may be done.
8. Joint Training. Joint training and mock exercises between the civil disaster management apparatus and local troops should be carried out from time to time to review operational preparedness and identify infirmities in the joint response to a disaster. These exercises will help review the procedures, communications, and develop mutual faith and rapport.
9. Management of Incoming Relief. This aspect assumes great importance as very large quantities of relief material starts to pour into the affected area. This needs to be strictly controlled and distributed in the priority of degree of seriousness of affected persons. Wastage of relief should be guarded against.
10. Law and Order in Relief Camps. This needs to be ensured and adequately coordinated between all agencies.
11. Means of Communication. Reliable, secure and dependable communication arrangements based on different types of technology should be ensured, with the necessary built-in redundancy.

VII. CONCLUSION

The first objective of the research was to identify areas where lack of coordination between the civil administration and AF adversely affected the performance of the AF while providing assistance during the floods in J&K (2014) and Chennai (2015). The second objective was to suggest ways to overcome such issues in future cases when AF are called upon to render such assistance. Accordingly, these objectives have been met by highlighting the areas needed for improvement and also by making significant recommendations to bridge the gaps. As an extension to this research, the author aspires to implement these suggestions if and when the calamities strike in future and test the efficacy of recommendations.

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