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The Indonesian Defence Forces and Disaster Relief: Potential Pitfalls and Challenges

By Evan A. Laksmana

Synopsis

The triple disaster that struck Indonesia in recent months has led to the deployment of the Indonesian Defence Forces (TNI) to provide disaster relief. What are the potential pitfalls and challenges of increasing the military's role in disaster relief and management?

Commentary

FOLLOWING the recent “triple disaster” in Indonesia — the major flooding in Papua, the tsunami in Mentawai islands, and the volcanic eruption in Central Java — the Indonesian Defence Forces (TNI) has been deployed to provide search and rescue assistance and other emergency relief. This involved several battalion-sized units from the Army Strategic Reserve Command, Marines, Air Force Special Forces, and others. This is but a recent example of the TNI's “traditional” role of being deployed in nearly every large-scale disaster Indonesia has seen. Such a role is a by-product of their operational preparedness and wide-ranging territorial structure across the country — making them a natural first responder.

This role is further underpinned by Law No. 34 of 2004, stipulating that the TNI could play an active role in responding to disasters and humanitarian crises as part of their Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). Doctrinally, the Army has also reportedly formulated guidelines for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). Several military units have also been seconded to the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB). In addition, a Presidential Decree in 2009 created the Disaster Relief Rapid Reaction Force (PRCPB) under the TNI Commander.

Yet, with this increasingly institutionalised role, some have asked that the TNI be more involved in the pre- and post-disaster management, not just during the emergency response. Lessons learned from the experience of other militaries however suggest that assigning the TNI to execute more HADR missions while providing them with a larger role in the pre- and post-disaster periods have significant consequences and potential pitfalls.

Potential Pitfalls of HADRs

Firstly, military resources are best suited for high-intensity, short-term assignments, while post-disaster relief and reconstruction could take weeks and months. Also, HADR missions require different training, more airlift capability, and different type of vehicles than the typical conventional forces. There is also the need to have an organisational culture and ethos that not only grasps humanitarian principles, but also encourage patience, restraint and flexibility.

Secondly, deeper and longer engagement of the military in HADR may be detrimental over time for civil-military relations. To begin with, HADR operations require soldiers to undertake civilian tasks — possibly raising civil-military tension. Also, militaries often prefer to modify disaster responses to fit more closely with their own training and abilities, especially when officers on the ground are at odds with the civilian officials. These ‘dual chain of command’ issues will be more pronounced without institutionalised mechanisms and training for civilian-military interface during disaster response and management.

Thirdly, while the military is ideal for rapid response, long-term deployment in HADR could move them away from their professional mooring as experts in the “management of violence”. This will further undermine readiness, effectiveness and professionalism in the long run by depriving them of the time to train their war-fighting missions, by causing wear and tear of military equipment, by diverting resources, and through other spill over impacts.

Fourthly, increasing the military’s role in pre- and post-HADR management might create too much dependence, while providing less impetus to empower civilian disaster actors. Such dependence is problematic when we consider that a standing peacetime military is generally administrative in posture, or with a minimum number of soldiers. As such, when a large-scale disaster suddenly strikes, the military may not necessarily have all the immediate strength and necessary resources — especially when military facilities themselves are hit.

Finally, the “militarisation” of civilian functions in disaster management might raise tension with international donor agencies and NGOs. This would complicate aid relief at a time when a single standard operating procedure has yet to be formulated. Also, in countries where the government itself is cash-strapped and the military is without sustained training in HADR, angering international donors will be counter-productive.

These potential pitfalls however do not imply that the TNI should not be deployed at all in HADR. Instead, they suggest that if Jakarta intends to increase the role of the TNI in disaster relief and management, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) should address two main challenges beforehand.

Challenges Ahead

Firstly, the MoD along with the TNI Headquarters must revisit its organisational structure, education and training, as well as Orders of Battle. This is because not all military units are on stand-by calls for disaster, nor do they have sustained training in HADR. Indeed, within the TNI, only a select few technical units — mainly the Combat Engineers and Health Battalions — have the specialised skills and training with a direct disaster response application.

Also, the TNI’s overall Orders of Battle still focus on domestic security with around 60 percent of its forces consisting of territorial and intelligence officers, with another 30 percent consisting of infantry and strike forces — which is unsuitable for sustained HADR deployment and management. Consequently, as the recent deployment suggests, the number of combat engineers and health battalions were so small that infantry troops and Special Forces provided the bulk of the disaster relief brigade.

Secondly, the MoD should support efforts to boost the civilian capacity of local governments and other agencies involved in disaster management and relief. Not only is this to ensure that a well-structured system would be in place at the local level — hence improving the pace of relief — but also because it would reduce the country’s dependence on the TNI that may not always have the necessary resources on the spot.

Without addressing these challenges, a hasty decision to provide more leeway for the TNI in disaster management might actually spell worse disasters to come.

Evan A. Laksmana is a researcher with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta, and an adjunct lecturer at the Indonesian Defence University. He was until recently a Visiting Associate Fellow with the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.