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## **Nepal Earthquake: Enhancing International Humanitarian Cooperation**

*By Mely Caballero-Anthony, Alistair D. B. Cook and Julius Cesar Trajano*

### **Synopsis**

*The powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake that hit Nepal on 25 April 2015 is the worst since 1934 and is once again a painful reminder of how vulnerable communities are to the destructive force of nature.*

### **Commentary**

STRIKING LESS than 80 kilometres northwest of Kathmandu, the earthquake has left thousands dead and affected 4.5 million people. It destroyed many homes and buildings in the Kathmandu Valley including the famous nine-storey Dharahara Tower. The US Geological Survey estimates the cost of damage to be between US\$100 million and \$10 billion. As the international community responds through both civilian and military means, cooperation will be essential.

There are around 1.5 million people who live in the Kathmandu Valley - one of the world's most earthquake-prone areas. Despite countless prior warnings from scientists and risk assessment studies, there is limited local capacity to carry out search-and-rescue missions with reports of rescuers using their bare hands to dig out bodies. This tragedy once again underlines the importance of robust disaster management plans and effective global and regional humanitarian cooperation mechanisms to respond effectively to those in need.

### **International HADR collaboration**

The next 48 hours presents the most critical period in providing for survivors. Clearly unprepared, the Nepali government is overwhelmed by the scale of the devastation. Hospitals are reported to be operating beyond capacity, with many wounded left waiting.

Meanwhile, people have steadily set up temporary tents in the town square due to insufficient shelters, with the prospects of hundreds more being displaced. One of the immediate needs is to secure the basic necessities (food, water, shelter, medicine and sanitation) for the millions of survivors if a second disaster, such as a health crisis, is to be avoided.

Last year the international community began reviewing the global humanitarian system which will culminate next year at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. However, the need to act is

immediate and the international community should now redouble efforts to cooperate in providing relief to Nepal. The Nepalese Government immediately declared a state of emergency and appealed to its neighbours and the international community for assistance. China and India have each pledged to step in with disaster assistance.

India was the first to respond to Nepal's appeal by sending in military aircraft with medical equipment and relief teams, including a mobile medical contingent requested by Nepal. China has sent a 62-strong International Search and Rescue Team. Pakistan has sent four C-130 aircraft carrying a 30-bed field hospital and army doctors and specialists. Singapore will send a team of 15 medical personnel, together with staff from the Regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Coordination Centre (RHCC).

The US government pledged to provide \$1 million in relief, including a disaster response team and an urban search-and-rescue team from USAID. The UK deployed an eight-strong humanitarian team while other EU countries also pledged assistance. Major international aid NGOs have also rushed to Nepal.

### **Immediate action lines**

One immediate task for international responders is to organise needs assessment teams to accurately determine the extent and impact of the earthquake. This will identify the required external assistance and gaps to be filled. The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs deployed a UN Disaster and Assessment Coordination team to provide immediate assistance. However, aid organisations have already struggled to assess the needs with intermittent communications and remote communities around the Himalayan nation.

It is therefore important that the combined capacities of well-experienced and highly equipped militaries and civilian agencies in a region prone to natural hazards play a vital role under Nepalese government leadership. In recent years, militaries have shown sufficient, unique but expensive capabilities and assets that can be deployed rapidly after a disaster.

However, foreign militaries must cooperate with each other and also with civilian agencies to provide an effective humanitarian response. Civil-military coordination therefore plays a key role both in responding to immediate need but also in longer-term recovery efforts. The World Humanitarian Summit Global Forum on Civil-Military Coordination held recently in Singapore identified the need for stronger communication and cooperation mechanisms to provide more effective humanitarian action.

### **Multilateral interagency coordination**

As the number of humanitarian responders increase, it is important for clear processes to expedite customs clearance for emergency cargo at the airport. This will ensure those affected get the assistance they need. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, a focal point and clear guidance for the coordination of humanitarian efforts was missing and affected the speed and reach of humanitarian aid.

The absence of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief is glaring, despite the fact that South Asia is disaster-prone. Undeniably, SAARC needs to draw on valuable lessons from what ASEAN has already done to boost regional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief cooperation. As demonstrated by the establishment of the AHA Centre, it is crucial to promptly activate a regional disaster mechanism that can complement international relief assistance and provide a mechanism to coordinate between civilian agencies and militaries.

Nepal is the 11th most vulnerable country and Kathmandu is the world's most vulnerable city to earthquakes. However, the government has not yet developed a workable disaster relief strategy. As a result, millions of people now face a long road to recovery. Women and children are of particular concern as they are at higher risk after a disaster from threats like sexual intimidation and separation from their families. Humanitarian agencies will have to ensure that their rights are protected as the new realities in Nepal come to light.

Over the last three years, Asia has experienced several disasters from Typhoon Haiyan to the weekend earthquake in Nepal, which serves as a constant reminder that the international community needs to develop more robust and sustainable regional and global humanitarian cooperation mechanisms. This will require strong leadership and financial commitments to ensure their success. This is of particular concern in Asia, which is home to many natural hazards and is a constant challenge for many governments.

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*Mely Caballero-Anthony is Associate Professor and Head of the RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS), Alistair D. B. Cook is Research Fellow and Coordinator of the newly-established Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Programme, and Julius Cesar Trajano is a Senior Research Analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.*

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**Nanyang Technological University**  
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)