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As the Water Recedes: Sri Lanka Rebuilds

By Vishalini Chandara Sagar

Synopsis

Tropical cyclone Roanu hit Sri Lanka on 15 May 2016 causing severe flooding and numerous landslides across the country. As Sri Lanka picks up the pieces and rebuilds, it is critical to evaluate the efficacy of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HADR) operations to better prepare the country in disaster management.

Commentary

A DEPRESSION in the Bay of Bengal caused tropical cyclone Roanu which triggered floods and landslides across the emerald isle. It left in its trail buried villages and homeless people. The floods have been described to be the worst disaster in the Indian Ocean since the 2004 Tsunami.

Authorities claimed that the torrential rains caused destruction in 22 out of 25 Sri Lankan districts including its capital, Colombo. According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, an estimated 500,000 people were directly affected by the disaster and about 307,000 people were forced to flee their homes because of the floods. Most of them have now taken refuge in many safe locations such as schools, temporary camps and with friends and relatives. The disaster also claimed the lives of at least 104 people, with another 99 still missing. On 25 May 2016, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) reported that a total of 128,000 houses have been affected by the cyclone, with 30,000 requiring reconstruction or rehabilitation.

Civil-Military Coordination in HADR

Many of the flood-affected areas, particularly in the mountainous regions, are still deemed too dangerous to access due to the possibility of more landslides.

The government, together with its tri-forces, the Sri Lanka Army, Navy and Air Force, the Police and the National Disaster Management Centre has led the country's disaster operations. These national entities have coordinated with United Nations agencies, World Health Organisation, the Red Cross Red Crescent movement and other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to conduct immediate search, rescue and relief operations.

While the Army dug through rubble to find survivors, the Navy reinforced flood defences to reduce the impact of rainfall and the Air Force airdropped food and water in affected areas. UNICEF, the Sri Lanka Red Cross, Oxfam and other CSOs have coordinated with the government and each other to conduct rapid assessments and provide assistance in the form of relief items, transportation and WASH (water, sanitation and health) facilities in locations used to temporarily house those displaced.

Rebuilding Affected Communities

As the water level recedes, and people affected by the disaster gradually regain access to the Internet, some have turned to social media to express views on how the rescue operations could have been made more effective.

One of the key concerns echoed by many was the failure to relay crucial information effectively to people affected by the disaster. People claimed there were no early warnings despite days of heavy rainfall and that no evacuation orders were issued. When announcements were made, it was via loudspeakers and megaphones.

Agencies like the Sri Lanka Red Cross strongly relied on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to relay disaster warnings, relief and rescue information and weather alerts. Local agencies Road.lk and PickMe used social media to help flood-affected victims. For example, Road.lk with its 22,000 Twitter followers, allows users to broadcast information on road conditions to help people deal with the crisis and distribute relief items.

Such an initiative could have been done more effectively and in a more coordinated manner, with key information being disseminated to the public constantly through national agencies.

Lessons from 2004 Tsunami?

It would be prudent to reference the learnings from the 2004 Tsunami as the nation rebuilds itself, post-disaster. In the immediate aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami, Sri Lanka received extensive international aid. However, as time passed, aid agencies withdrew, neglecting the medium and long-term needs of the people.

Reconstruction efforts in the capital, the economic hub of the country, have now begun and the government is looking at new policies to prevent current challenges

from recurring. For instance, a new nationwide building code took effect on 1 June 2016 to protect drainage areas and prevent construction in areas susceptible to landslides.

While this is a good move, enforcement of earlier similar requirements was weak. Moving forward, it is imperative that relevant organizations are equipped with both resources and relevant enforcement powers to administer these laws.

Priority at this stage should be accorded to assistance in rebuilding of disaster-affected communities. Many flood-affected victims have returned to their hometowns as temporary shelters close, only to find themselves homeless as their houses are inundated by mud and floodwaters. Many of these properties have been constructed on bank loans or spending their entire savings. It is important to continue placing people at the heart of the crisis, and to empower them to rebuild their lives.

This will include cleaning up the rural areas, particularly water sources, providing grants to rebuild their homes, repairing transport and communication infrastructure, creating employment opportunities, ensuring remittances flow, fulfill the special needs of females and other disadvantaged groups, and to resurrect local businesses.

How Can the Region Contribute?

The Sri Lankan government had sought for international aid in the form of grants and loans and expertise in urban planning to prevent such flooding in the future. A crisis like this also presents itself as an opportunity for the country to elevate its economic status so that its people can lead better lives.

One way this can be achieved is for the government to make it easier for foreign companies to establish themselves in the country to help rebuild homes and infrastructure for the people. This would be an attractive and mutually beneficial way for countries in the Asia Pacific region to help Sri Lanka in return of providing more opportunities for its local businesses to expand.

This in turn, will breed local expertise through increased job opportunities. ASEAN is a potential platform to engage Southeast Asian businesses to invest in Sri Lanka. In conclusion, the recent floods in Sri Lanka provided fresh perspective on the symbiotic relationship between state and non-state actors in HADR operations and how aid from other countries can be beneficial to not just the recipient but the donor as well.

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