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HADR Cooperation: Insights from Turkey's Response to the Earthquake

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SYNOPSIS

*Two lessons for cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in ASEAN can be drawn from Turkey's response to the twin earthquakes last month, according to **LINA GONG**. First, HADR cooperation can be strengthened with disaster-prone countries in other regions. Second, disaster response planning should be more future-oriented.*

COMMENTARY

The twin earthquakes that hit Turkey and Syria on 6 February shocked the world by the [enormous damage caused and the huge number of casualties](#). Over 45,000 people were killed and 20 million affected on the Turkish side alone. On the same day, Turkey's interior minister [appealed](#) for international assistance. As of 17 February, a total of [266 foreign search and rescue teams](#) had been deployed to the field, involving 11,757 personnel. [Over 100 countries](#) offered assistance in different forms, including countries that are facing their own humanitarian emergencies at home.

In contrast to the rapid international assistance, the government-led relief effort has been [criticised](#) for a number of weaknesses, particularly the insufficient capacity in search and rescue. While it is unfair to ignore the fact that the twin earthquakes significantly compounded the challenge, two other issues contributed to the inadequacy of this disaster response: delayed deployment of the military and a lack of contingency planning.



Hatay, Turkey in ruins after the earthquakes struck on 6 February 2023. Though international assistance was rapidly deployed, government-led relief efforts left much to be desired. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Role of Militaries in Disasters

Although it is widely recognised that military humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations play a critical role in responses to major disasters due to the advanced capacities and equipment of militaries, it is up to the affected government to decide whether and when to deploy military assets, a decision that is heavily influenced by political and social contexts. One of the major [criticisms](#) of the Turkish government is that the military was not deployed in sufficient numbers within the first 48 hours, which is a critical window for search and rescue. In addition, military assets that are useful in relief efforts such as drones, electronic surveillance, and heavy transport and communication equipment were [not fully utilised](#).

Regardless of the actual time when the Turkish military was dispatched, institutional changes suggest that the country's disaster management structures have been centralised. The Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) was established in 2009 and designated as the sole authority for disaster management. In parallel was the marginalisation of the military in the country's latest [Disaster Response Plan](#). Such institutional adjustments are not unique to Turkey; other countries have done the same. Indonesia, for instance, formed the National Agency for Disaster Countermeasure (BNPB) in 2008 after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 to enhance coordination and efficiency in disaster management.

What is interesting is the contrast between Turkey's reluctance to deploy the armed forces in disasters and the trend of greater use of military assets in other countries.

The two opposite trends represent different perceptions of military humanitarianism. On the one hand lies the [principle of deploying the military as a last resort](#), as outlined in the Oslo Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief, which was first released in 1994 primarily for complex emergencies, such as armed conflicts.

Military involvement for humanitarian purposes is sensitive in a complex setting, carrying various [risks](#) such as threatening the safety and security of humanitarian workers, and compromising the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and operational independence. Moreover, given the coercive nature and war-fighting mission of militaries, their involvement in domestic issues, if not handled properly, risks being perceived as undermining democracy and freedom. Therefore, the principle of last resort has long been upheld by governments and humanitarian organisations, particularly by those in the West.

On the other hand, some countries have high acceptance of militaries as first responders, particularly those in the Asia-Pacific. In Indonesia, while the BNPB is considered a civilian agency, all heads of BNPB since its establishment have had [military backgrounds](#), with the recent ones taking up service as active military officers. In addition, due to the pandemic and natural hazards arising from climate change, some developed and developing countries have increasingly been found to deploy armed forces to [support pandemic response measures](#) and [domestic disaster relief operations](#), although this trend has caused [concern over democracy being threatened](#).

The debate on military disaster response is not new, but the criticism of the Turkish government over the delayed deployment of the military in this earthquake highlights the importance of governments reviewing the role of their militaries in disaster relief and the mechanisms to maximise the value of military involvement in a timely manner.

Importance of Future-oriented Planning

Another failure in the Turkish government's response is inadequate disaster preparedness, which points to the need for a more anticipatory approach to planning rather than just planning for a replication of past disasters. Highly exposed to seismic hazards, Turkey has considerable experience in responding to earthquakes, supported by a set of established institutions, mechanisms and procedures. In anticipation of a 7.5 magnitude earthquake, AFAD conducted an [exercise](#) in 2019 in Pazarcik, the epicentre of the recent earthquake. The expectation of support from neighbouring cities was a critical link in the response plan then.

While AFAD largely anticipated the magnitude and location of the latest earthquake, the disaster response plan, possibly developed based on past experience, did not foresee the geographical expanse of the effects and the inability of neighbouring cities to provide the expected help because they themselves were affected and waiting for relief. What is worse, local disaster responders themselves or their family members were victims of the tremors, which undermined the capacity of local response. The chaos in the early days suggested that the contingency plan was inadequate in not having anticipated local and neighbouring support systems being paralysed.

An important lesson from the Turkish experience is that disaster response planning should be more future-oriented, anticipating factors and trends that can disrupt or limit relief efforts and developing alternative plans, instead of solely relying on past experience. This is particularly important for disaster-prone countries. Professor Dwikorita Karnawati, director of the Indonesian Agency for Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics, [pointed out](#) that a similar tragedy could possibly occur in Indonesia. The increasing possibility of concurring disasters – as evident in the past three years, when we experienced the pandemic, the repercussions of the Ukraine crisis and extreme weather events in many parts of the world – also highlights the need for greater anticipation in disaster planning and action.

Implications for HADR Cooperation

Turkey's response to the earthquake last month highlights at least two areas of HADR cooperation in Southeast Asia. First, a few Southeast Asian militaries, including those of [Indonesia](#), [Malaysia](#), [Thailand](#), [the Philippines](#) and [Vietnam](#), deployed assets to support the relief efforts in Turkey this time, demonstrating the ability and potential to develop HADR cooperation beyond the region. HADR cooperation within the ASEAN-centred frameworks, such as workshops and table-top exercises, could possibly be extended to engaging disaster-prone countries in other regions, such as the Middle East and Latin America. Such exercises would allow militaries that hold different views on the role of militaries in disasters to share experience and be sensitised to other perspectives.

Second, [humanitarian futures](#), that is, the application of [futures thinking](#) in the humanitarian context, should be encouraged in disaster response planning. As defence establishments invest heavily in strategic foresight and planning, they should take the lead in promoting future-oriented approaches through HADR workshops and exercises and develop scenarios based on emerging risks and trends.

HADR is a core area of security cooperation in Southeast Asia. The Turkey-Syria earthquake points to the potential for expanding the region's HADR network beyond the traditional comfort zone of the Asia-Pacific and diversifying perspectives and experiences. It also highlights the importance of strengthening future-oriented humanitarian planning through HADR cooperation.

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