Mega-Disaster Response: What challenges will we face? Can we overcome them?

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The Issue in brief

- Mega-disasters cast a dark shadow over global society's future. <u>Demographic and environmental trends</u> – along with <u>enduring seismic hazards</u> – are heightening our vulnerabilities.
- Some good news: initiatives to <u>build resilience</u> in disaster-prone regions are gaining traction. But there's the inescapable question of how best to respond <u>whenever a catastrophic event overwhelms national</u> <u>response capacity</u>.
- Crafting more rapid, effective responses to future megadisasters will require the US and its partners to wrestle with <u>four interconnected challenges</u>. Each can be tackled; none will be easy.

First, a few basics...

> A disaster's <u>speed of onset</u> may vary enormously, from <u>sudden</u> (earthquakes) to <u>rapid</u> (hurricanes, cyclones, typhoons) to more <u>gradual</u> (droughts, famine) to <u>continuous</u> events (infectious disease).

The scope of impact can vary too, from localized ('99 landslides in Vargas, Venezuela), to regional ('04 Indian Ocean tsunami), to global ('14-15 Ebola vectors from West Africa, or so we feared).

Not surprisingly, personal and community-level "coping skills" are often strongest in regions where institutional capacity is weakest.

...a few more basics:

Socio-political context matters greatly. Relief activities can occur in permissive (peaceful) venues; in hazardous or non-permissive settings (complex emergencies/hostilities). And neighbors count for a lot...

Operationally, movement is key: whether to flow relief to affected communities, or move communities to the aid, or orchestrate two-way movement. Each option may save lives and reduce suffering, albeit on a very forbidding landscape...







Four Core Challenges

➤# 1 – <u>Operating in a "multi-hazard" environment</u>

- Fewer disasters are purely 'natural;' most have 'anthropogenic' qualities;
- Even purely natural events can also feature 'hybrid' hazards (e.g., earthquakes/tsunamis, followed by tropical storms).

>#2 – <u>Synchronizing key relief missions</u>

- Some missions (e.g., US&R, medevac, sheltering, engineering, etc.) aren't mutually reinforcing.
- Mission impacts in some cases (e.g., post-surgical care/airdrops/temporary bridging) can complicate rather than alleviate operational pressures.

Challenges...continued

- #3 Working the "back-end" recovery challenge
 - Orchestrating transitions from relief missions to 'bounce back better' recovery activities isn't easy.
 - Smooth hand-offs can fall prey to local disputes that existed prior to the disaster.

#4 – <u>Strengthening civil-military collaboration</u>

- In high-end disasters, military support for relief will likely be required, with boots on the ground, (or at sea or in the air);
- A clear/mutually-reinforcing division of labor is always preferred, but it's sometimes difficult to achieve...



A roadmap for innovation?

≻<u>At the governance level</u>:

- <u>Within USG</u>, forge closer 'upstream' coordination and strengthen 'downstream' capability among all relevant agencies;
- Rebalance 'palliative' & 'curative' USG aid streams;
- Discipline responses with budgetary stewardship;
- <u>Internationally</u>, mitigate the 'out of sight/out of mind' problem with funding offsets;
- Address NGO actor 'proliferation' through stronger performance standards and access prioritization at the field level...

A roadmap, continued...

≻<u>At the field level</u>:

- For at-risk areas, assess 'choke-point' issues in advance;
- Anticipate massive human displacement & long-term medical needs;
- Build greater IO field capability (e.g., WHO);
- Broaden partnerships among regional partners and with the private sector;
- Strengthen mission tasking/tracking in civ-mil operations and adopt a more 'blended expertise' approach for critical tasks;
- Whenever a disaster hits, start post-relief transition planning immediately; and
- Anticipate/proactively engage the social media/public affairs dimensions of disaster response.

Topics for further study

- Developing more rigorous multi-hazard (MH) mapping – what's the best way forward?
- Enhancing responder training/equipping for MH environments (e.g., donning/doffing/utilizing PPE)?
- Crafting new strategies for civ-mil regional partnering (including capacity assessment)?
- Exploring the value-added of crowd sourcing/digital connectivity for key missions (e.g., US&R)?
- Managing long-term human displacement (e.g., climate refugees, the Dadaab issue)?
- Charting new pathways for more energetic publicprivate partnerships?

Sorry to 'drone on' for so long! Some closing quotes:

"We may all be in the same storm, but we're in different boats." Tim Geithner, circa 2008

"Gentlemen, we've run out of the money. Now we have to think." Winston Churchill, circa 1944.

Comments/Questions/Critiques?