

Enhancing Civil-Military Coordination in Climate-related Disaster Responses

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Issue

Understanding and reducing coordination challenges between military organizations and humanitarian actors is vital to create efficient, timely and effective responses to climate-related disasters and emergencies.

Background

Initiating effective response mechanisms to climate-related disasters is a growing security issue that is affecting people in Canada and around the world. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), by 2030, climate change could push up to 130 million more people into poverty as climate disasters become fiercer and more frequent (UNDP 2023). Disasters such as floods, wildfires and droughts, exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, including food and water insecurity, as well as socio-economic fragility and political grievances (ibid.). Appropriate, timely and effective international response mechanisms are imperative to decrease these adverse effects and ensure climate security.

Military organizations are increasingly being called upon to be first responders to climate-related disasters. Last year alone, Canada experienced over 6,000 wildfires, burning almost 46 million acres, requiring the assistance of the Canadian Armed Forces on numerous occasions (Natural Resources Canada 2024). This mission is increasingly straining Canada's military forces, and is likely unsustainable going forward, as Canada's Chief of Defence Staff Wayne Eyre recently noted (Pugliese 2024). Globally, turning to national and international military forces to respond to climate-related emergencies is increasingly

common, according to the Centre for Climate Security, in its efforts to track military responses to climate change (Wong 2024). Enhancing international cooperation for climate disaster interventions is thus crucially important.

Canada has taken steps to address shortcomings in adapting to climate-related disasters by proposing a range of state-to-state initiatives. This has included climate finance, building national adaptation capacity in developing countries such as the program Partnering for Climate, and initiating cooperation with regional organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on climate security planning. (Global Affairs Canada 2024; Government of Canada 2024a; ibid. 2024b). However, missing from these efforts is a coordinated strategy to strengthen existing coordination and support mechanisms provided by international organizations in the aftermath of international climate-related disasters.

Canada has an opportunity to help address the current gaps in coordination between military and humanitarian organizations, by proposing policies to more effectively and efficiently coordinate aid to vulnerable populations in climate-related disasters.

Gaps in International Law

Gaps exist in international law on how humanitarian actors and the military should coordinate in response to climate-related disasters. While many participating states and humanitarian actors deem the military to be a tool of last resort, the imperative for quick military interventions in disaster responses creates tensions, due to concern that militaries may overstep boundaries, undermine the state and

clash with the impartiality principle crucial to humanitarian actors (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2006). Four non-binding guidelines currently steer civil-military responses: the Oslo Guidelines (1994); the Inter Agency Standing Committee Reference Paper (2004); the Military and Civil Defence Assets Guidelines (2006); and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Non-Binding Guidelines on the Use of Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys (2013). These policies lack guidance on how humanitarian actors should work with police forces, militaries or private security contractors. This is important because military actors may be tasked with being first responders by some states and regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Moreover, humanitarian organizations may need to negotiate with military actors in order to gain access to affected populations.

Coordination Gaps Lead to Distrust

The leadership and coordination structures of humanitarian organizations are consensus-based, which differs from the command-and-control structures of military organizations (Jones and Stoddard 2003). This can increase tension and distrust between humanitarian organizations and military organizations. The United Nations' Inter-Agency Standing Committee tries to blend these structures together by providing a hierarchical structure for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UN branches to coordinate for disaster responses. However, this effort often favours the work of humanitarian actors, frequently neglecting to include the foreign and national military in decision making and coordination work (ibid.). The coordination gaps that sometimes result increase distrust between military responders, NGOs and national groups, harming disaster response efforts.

Responding to Pakistan's 2012 floods, Swedish government defence officials noted that humanitarian actors sent low-ranking professionals to coordination meetings (Pramanik 2015). This sent a message to foreign military actors that the coordination meetings were not important, hampering effective coordination with foreign responders (ibid.). Foreign military responders were uncertain if the reason for poor national coordination was due to distrust and unwillingness to work with foreign military actors or because neither side was clear on the leadership or structures of the other's role (ibid.).

Both actors lack an understanding of each other's mandates and are hesitant to develop dialogue (Grace 2020). As shown in interviews with UN humanitarian actors, many expressed fears that military involvement may exacerbate

existing conflict, leading to the suspensions of humanitarian operations (ibid.). As well, the UN Civil-Military Coordination Guide for Military involvement suggests that if humanitarian organizations associate with the military and their activities, it may put aid workers in harm's way (UN Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination 2017).

Responding in Complex Emergencies

Humanitarian organizations and foreign militaries often struggle to reach affected populations in disaster emergencies when the area is embroiled in conflict, controlled by oppressive regimes or under military rule. In September 2023, two dams burst during a powerful storm in Libya's coastal city of Derna, causing flooding that killed at least 11,300 people (Michaelson 2023). The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, foreign military organizations, and UN personnel struggled to respond to the crisis. Their ability to access affected populations was limited by the controlling regional militia led by Khalifa Haftar and his sons, who used the disaster response as a way to exert control over the area (ibid.). Facing criticism over neglect of the dams that caused the disaster, Haftar's regime shut off access to Derna, preventing people from accessing electricity, safe drinking water and food (ibid.). This severely impacted humanitarian operations, forcing them to negotiate with the regime in order to access and aid the affected population (ibid.).

Disasters in conflict zones also highlight the challenges of securing humanitarian responders to climate-related emergencies. While providing assistance in Somalia for famine and drought relief in 2011, aid workers were kidnapped and violently targeted by armed actors of the Al Shabaab organization in the south and central parts of Somalia (Tronc, Emmanuel, Grace and Nahikian 2018). Humanitarian organizations were prevented by Al Shabaab from accessing foreign military security services (ibid.). Instead, humanitarian actors relied on private security companies run by local warlords, adopting security tactics such as the fortification of their bases (ibid.). This increased securitization led to a divide between international humanitarian workers and local actors, damaging relationships between locals and international humanitarian actors (ibid.).

Local Perceptions

According to a UN Civil-Military Coordination (UN-CMCoord) "Guide for the Military" involved in emergency response, local populations may not perceive the difference between military and humanitarian operations (UN-

CMCoord 2017). This is especially prevalent under authoritative regimes or in complex emergencies (ibid.). Therefore, because of local distrust toward national and international military forces, the humanitarian environment can significantly diminish, potentially resulting in the suspension of humanitarian operations (ibid.; House of Commons 2017).

Recommendations

Create an Expert Group to provide guidance and knowledge. Canada has begun to build international coordination efforts through its work in crafting NATO's new Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence (Government of Canada 2024c). However, these efforts can go further by convening an expert group to enhance communication and craft practical solutions to coordination issues. The expert group can involve Canadian and international academics and experienced responders from both military and civilian background, who can help advise international organizations on effective policies and lessons learned. This can strengthen NATO's current efforts to enhance training and education capacities with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the United Nations, further demonstrating NATO's willingness to openly address coordination issues (NATO 2022; 2019).

Use diplomatic strengths to create action at international forums. Recognizing Canada's limits in deploying military capabilities and personnel to respond to disasters abroad, Canada can use its diplomatic assets to incentivize collaboration among humanitarian actors, military actors and disaster-affected states. This can be accomplished through existing international forums such as NATO and the Organization of American States. In an era of increasing demands on Canada's Armed Forces, Canada can make more effective use of its soft power assets in Global Affairs Canada to promote the creation of clearer guidelines on how both national and international militaries can provide the most effective and efficient disaster aid for people in need.

Promote the creation of anticipatory structures within regional forums. To secure a timely and effective response to climate-related disasters, the creation of anticipatory plans are crucial. Pre-disaster planning can reduce the need for post-disaster interventions. Responding to yearly monsoon floods in Bangladesh, in 2020, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2020) launched a pre-approved plan to allocate resources and funding to the International Federation of Red Cross, the

World Food Program and the Government of Bangladesh. This plan enhanced the response to Bangladesh's 2020 floods, at half the cost of the 2019 floods (ibid.). Canada can similarly promote the creation of anticipatory plans within regional bodies.

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