

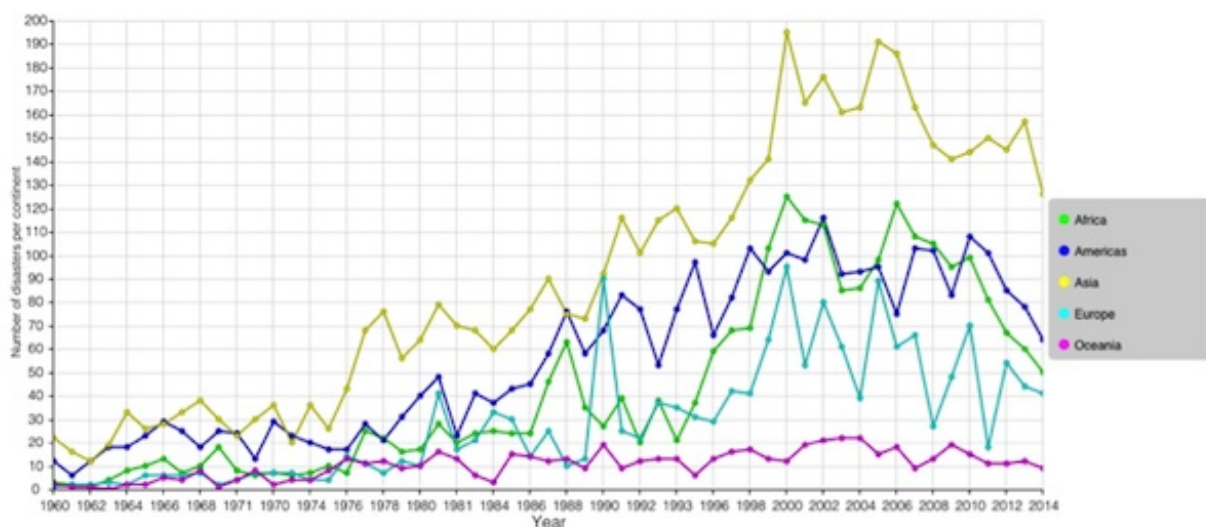
# Need For Institutionalised Humanitarian Assistance And Disaster Relief Operations Across Borders

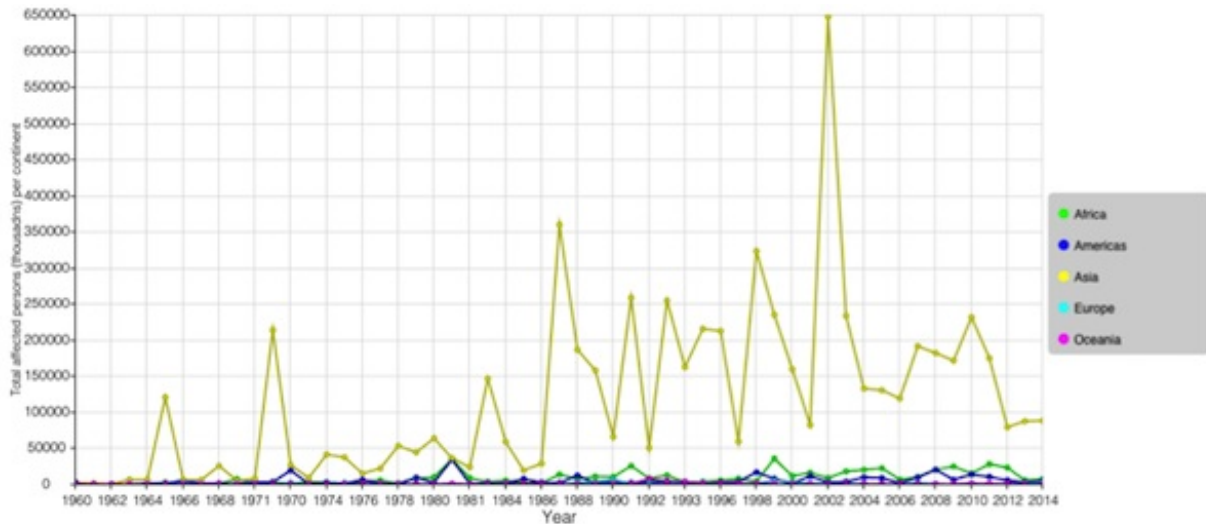
[claws.in/1376/need-for-institutionalised-humanitarian-assistance-and-disaster-relief-operations-across-borders-ganapathy-vanchinathan.html](http://claws.in/1376/need-for-institutionalised-humanitarian-assistance-and-disaster-relief-operations-across-borders-ganapathy-vanchinathan.html)

Tragedies, it is said, bring people together. It is therefore not unlikely, that times of crisis, natural disasters in particular, should bring nations together. The earthquake in Nepal that occurred on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2015 and that was followed by many more is no exception. India has been quick to respond to the earthquake in Nepal with all out help. There are all the reasons she should be quick. India is one of Nepal's closest neighbours, six lakh Indians are estimated to reside in Nepal, a history of unique linkages bind the two countries, the border is open, there is a multilateral provision SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SARRND) in place to facilitate such help and last but not the least, India's growing diplomatic desire to be counted.

That India has been prompt and unqualified in its response is beyond question, and that Indian leadership at all levels has been pivotal in this response has to be acknowledged. Task forces of various kinds have been inducted - Indian Army, National Disaster Response Force, IAF teams have been inducted with various types of specialists and equipment to operationalise, repair and facilitate work in the critical areas of roads, communication, medical assistance, food, water, transportation and evacuation.[i] The assistance has been without doubt most needed and crucial to Nepal at this trying moment. Not only India, there have been many other countries that have rushed aid in various forms.

According to EM-DAT, a product of the Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) where one can access data and analysis on disasters, the Asian continent is the region in the world exposed to the maximum natural hazards and the most disaster-prone. Devastating earthquakes, extreme temperature and climatic variations causing floods, landslides, cloudbursts, droughts and cyclones mark the region. All these cause untold loss of lives and property. As a consequence, notes the World Bank, "public expenditure in affected region is under severe stress by the repeated need for relief work in vulnerable areas" severely impacting budget for developmental activities.[ii]





Source : [http://www.emdat.be/disaster\\_trends/index.html](http://www.emdat.be/disaster_trends/index.html)

Financial aid is indeed very important for the country facing disaster and will find its use at the right time; but what is critical and immediately required in such an earthquake disaster scenario is help in search and rescue, clearance of debris, medical assistance, provision of shelters, provision and distribution of food and water, communication, transportation. And for that it is physical aid in form of trained men and specialist equipment that can be deployed fastest to mitigate the immediate fallouts of the disaster that will count. Rebuilding will occur at a later stage.

Neighbouring countries can help each other best in such times of crisis by conducting bilateral or multi-national Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations. However, such operations are usually quite complex and preparations for these can be a much dilemma. The harder questions, for instance, are

- what kind of disaster does one prepare for.
- where is the disaster likely to occur.
- when will the disaster or calamity occur.

Unlike operations of war where armies cannot cross borders legitimately to reconnoiter 'enemy' territory to plan for operations, HADR operations provide opportunities to nations and their designated elements to prepare and equip for these contingencies in advance. Adequate preparation followed by immediate response whenever an event occurs can significantly mitigate effects of such disasters, rather than just reacting to events without prior preparations and contingency plans.

If one were to divide two nations into the acceptor (the one upon whom disaster has visited) and the donor (the one who is extending aid), there are many issues that need to be and can be tied up during times of practice or formalization of standard operation procedures for such operations. For instance - norms for clearance for movement of persons and equipment from donor to acceptor country; nomination and familiarisation with liaison persons and organisations; nomination and familiarisation of likely areas of operations and infrastructure in place in acceptor nation; legal issues; nomination of who will prioritise/control deployment or various resources. These are just some issues. Such matters can best be addressed before any disaster rather than during the relief process. Add to this multinational presence involved in relief operations in the acceptor nation, the chaos and unintended political currents could be immense and avoidable, and could lead to unnecessary duplication of effort and loss of precious time in just identifying assistance points.

There is thus a very strong case for institutionalizing such HADR operations in the Indian subcontinent. An example of a country, a leading light in such operations is Japan. Japan, with its predisposition to earthquakes and the fact that in post World War II its military roles and capabilities have been redefined, has put in much of its efforts and resources towards improving and standardising capabilities in HADR operations. Just for example, to this end, the Japan Ground Self-Defence Force (JGSDF) conducts a blackboard exercise every year called Multi-lateral Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (MCAP), where the Indian Army has been a participant. This exercise provides

detailed understanding of how multinational HADR operations are planned and executed.[iii] It is not confirmed whether the MoD endorses participation in this exercise any more.

The East Asian Summit (EAS) is one such multilateral forum whose members are the ten ASEAN countries (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam) and Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the United States and Russia whose ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) is the common platform for EAS members to work towards multinational cooperation in rapid response to disasters. The EAS Statement on Rapid Disaster Response which was ratified by these members in November 2014 during the 9<sup>th</sup> EAS held at Myanmar appears to be a step in the right direction and perusal of the agreement shows that, at least in spirit, the organization is serious in carrying forward its agenda.[iv]

Closer home, the SAARC, which binds India, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, has a similar arrangement called the SARRND.[v] The agreements provide for formulation of SOPs, planning, reconnaissance, mock drills and earmarking assets and capacities on standby for emergency response during disaster relief. The SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) is located in New Delhi, India. More recently, in January 2015 a five-day workshop was organized by the SDMC in Jakarta to finalise a time-bound road map to implement the SARRND.[vi] Some key policy recommendations included -

- Institutionalized sharing of relevant disaster-related information including early warning.
- Setting up of Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) for Regional Response Mechanism (RRM)
- Developing emergency response mechanism, strategies, contingency response
- Measures for enhancing capacity for multi hazards by undertaking training, mock exercise, etc
- Provisioning for budgetary allocations to operationalize RRM.

The SARRND does provide the platform, but whether it works or not has much to do with the seriousness the member countries can inject into this agreement. But nothing stops two countries from bilaterally proceeding towards dialogue and implementation of processes to see future HADR operations successfully being rolled out.

On the Indian front, the Indian Army has once again demonstrated its natural capacity to step into the driver's seat in times of such calamities. It is only appropriate and high time that the armed forces seek and are nominated lead responders in HADR operations, which will help them to plan, equip and train for such operations, thus delivering more people from the jaws of disaster. An army, despite all its glory, has the unpleasant task of eliminating the 'enemy'. By involving itself in HADR operations in the sub-continent more often, it will find itself more at saving lives and what better way of confidence-building with neighbours!

*The author is Senior Fellow at CLAWS. Views expressed are personal.*

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