

## CATASTROPHIC EVENTS

# Interview with Maurits R. Jochems\*

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### ***Could you explain briefly the nature and extent of NATO's civil emergency planning activities?***

Since the creation of the Alliance in 1949, NATO has always placed great emphasis on the protection of civilian populations. In 1953, NATO agreed on a disaster assistance scheme, recognizing that the capabilities to protect populations in wartime could also be used to protect them against the effects of natural or man-made disasters. Following the launch of Partnership for Peace in 1994, many Partner nations showed an interest in enhancing co-operation with NATO in the field of civil protection and disaster response. In 1998, following an initiative from the Russian Federation, the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) was created at NATO HQ.

Civil emergency planning is first and foremost a national responsibility, and civil assets remain under national control at all times. NATO's added value lies in facilitating co-ordination and liaison through structures such as the Co-ordination Centre. This enables smaller Allies and Partners to contribute

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capabilities, such as a field hospital or water purification unit, that they would not otherwise be able to contribute. The aim of civil emergency planning in NATO is to share information on national planning activity to ensure the most effective utilization of civil resources for use during emergency situations. It enables Allies and Partner nations to assist each other in preparing for and dealing with the consequences of crisis, disaster or conflict.

***What do you understand by a co-ordinated civil and military response?***

Planning and executing military operations is a complex process. In order to mount an operation that best addresses a crisis situation, military planners and commanders often need to call upon expertise and assets from the civilian sector. NATO provides an effective forum in which the use of civilian and military assets can complement one another and be dovetailed to achieve a desired goal. Close co-operation and interoperability between military and civilian actors is vital, and the specific nature of the scenario will dictate whether a military response is required, or a civil response, or a combination of both.

***Isn't NATO a military alliance?***

From the above, it is clear that NATO has a civil dimension, but it is primarily a political alliance which makes use of mainly military instruments. However, in most NATO member states the military also has a role to assist civil authorities in exceptional and overwhelming situations. Of course, the military's principal task in a given country is that of national defence. Its second task is to contribute to the Alliance's defence, including contributing to peacekeeping operations. Military assistance to civil authorities in several countries, e.g. the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, is leading to more intense contacts between interior and defence ministries, for example to make arrangements enabling the former to draw on a number of helicopters during emergencies such as floods.

***If civil emergency planning is a national responsibility, why should military capabilities be deployed in international disaster-relief operations?***

Recent disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Pakistan have highlighted how useful certain military capabilities can be when first responders find themselves overwhelmed. Some may believe that disaster-relief work is done better and more economically by civilian actors: national authorities, international organizations or non-governmental organizations. However, while this is the case for most disasters, there are unfortunate occasions when the scale of the disaster is so great that first responders – local authority and/or interior ministry services – are simply overwhelmed. Assistance by the military may also be necessary for operations requiring special equipment such as airlifts, field hospitals or bridges, etc. It is in these instances that the military can and should become involved. Helping national authorities in responding to natural or industrial disasters is, as stated above, a fundamental mission of the armed forces in most NATO and non-NATO countries.

***Could you clarify how roles are distributed if NATO intervenes in a civil disaster?***

Before answering, I have a remark about terminology. I have some difficulty with the term “intervene” in your question. If a disaster occurs, NATO provides assistance following a request from a stricken nation. I underline that NATO does not intervene, it offers assistance on the basis of a request.

In essence, there are very few capabilities independently owned by NATO. NATO draws almost entirely on national capabilities. NATO’s value lies in its capacity to mobilize and use these capabilities in an organized fashion. NATO has command and control capabilities, headquarters in Naples, Brunssum, Lisbon and Brussels. NATO has an overview of what is available, where and with whom. Not all nations have capacities or capabilities in sufficient quantity and quality. In some nations, there is room for improvement, as the British say. NATO’s major role is to mobilize and co-ordinate the use of these capabilities. In general, those nations with considerable resources handle emergency situations themselves. However, some nations stricken by a major disaster may have shortfalls and might ask for help. In the case where NATO support is requested, its role is to help address the shortfalls and, using the Inventory of National Capabilities, to mobilize these resources within those nations of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council who possess them. Once resources are located, the task is to help the stricken nation and to support nations so as to bring assistance to the place where it is needed. The Disaster Response Co-ordination Centre is a small but effective unit.

***Are there differences between the military approach to civilian support and that of national authorities or humanitarian organizations?***

We don’t compartmentalize one approach or another. It’s all part of a co-ordinated response. While the military clearly has useful capabilities to bring to disaster-relief operations, such assistance should be provided according to the principle of subsidiarity. By this I mean that civil responders should always be in the lead, and must formally request military support. It is demand-driven assistance, not a supply-driven relief contribution. In principle, local authorities should ask for external, including military, assistance, if and when they decide that the scale of the disaster is too great for them to handle it alone.

***Is that what happened in the case of Hurricane Katrina in the United States and the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005?***

Yes. In the case of both Hurricane Katrina and the South Asian earthquake, the respective national governments formally requested NATO assistance. In the case of Pakistan, the United Nations also asked NATO for assistance in putting together its own relief operation. As a result, most of the crucial shelter material provided by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees was transported to Pakistan via NATO’s airlift before the onset of the harsh Himalayan winter. NATO also participated in the overall co-ordination meetings in Islamabad, jointly led by Pakistan government officials and the UN resident

representative, as well as in the relevant UN-led cluster meetings, such as the health and shelter clusters.

***NATO's operation in Pakistan was the first major civilian disaster-relief operation.***

The earthquake hit Pakistan and parts of India on 8 October 2005. On 10 October the Pakistan government asked NATO and other organizations for assistance. The following day, NATO took the decision to establish an airlift from Europe to Pakistan to transport much-needed relief material to high-altitude areas. We transported 3,400 tonnes of relief goods, mostly tents and shelter material, made available by the United Nations. At the same time, NATO considered other options and decided to make available an extra hospital for the stricken area, a unit of engineers for relief repairs, and water purification units. Engineers repaired about 60 kilometres of badly damaged roads. The medical personnel treated some 5,000 people directly and 3,500 people through mobile teams. The whole operation lasted for a period of about three months. Instinctively we had the idea that a relief operation should be limited in time. After that, reconstruction activities would start, and reconstruction is definitely a role to be led by the UN and others, not by NATO.

***What are the lessons learned from Pakistan?***

Our main problem was funding. For example, the operational costs of running both the strategic airlift and onward distribution by the helicopters were enormous. Defence ministries which ultimately finance NATO operations do not have funds to run humanitarian relief operations. If you look at it on a national basis, this is the responsibility of development co-operation ministries.

Some steps towards reforming and improving funding mechanisms were already put in place during the Pakistan relief operation by individual countries. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Secretary of State for International Development, Hilary Benn, decided to cover the additional operating costs caused by the deployment of three Chinook helicopters and a regiment of engineers out of the international development budget. By using another budget line, Secretary Benn was also able to make a significant financial contribution to the NATO “trust fund” that met the costs of the airlift.

The benefits of Secretary Benn’s improvised arrangement are clear. A department for international development does not need to operate and deploy its own fleet of helicopters. This avoids duplication of assets. Moreover, depending on how costs are calculated, this solution is likely to be considerably cheaper than any arrangement involving the leasing of commercial helicopters, if, indeed, they are available.

In order to institutionalize such arrangements, however, it will also be necessary to revise definitions of what constitutes official development assistance. It seems that the financing of military helicopters for disaster-relief operations does not qualify as official development assistance under current definitions. As a result, there is a disincentive for development ministers to copy the initiative of

their UK counterpart in Pakistan. But given that many countries are forging ever stronger working relationships between ministries of international development, defence and foreign relations, it might be time to reassess the assistance criteria.

In the case of the Pakistan relief operation, such a move would have been especially appropriate since the United Nations asked NATO to provide an air-bridge and to deploy helicopters. Common sense would suggest that either NATO nations be allowed to bill some of the additional costs incurred by their militaries to the international assistance and development budgets or that the United Nations reimburse them directly out of funds collected to pay for the relief operation.

***In what kind of civil emergency may NATO offer its services in the future? Besides natural disasters, could you imagine operating in man-made disasters or even chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attacks? Is it possible to prepare for all these different threats?***

Some years ago, NATO was limited to dealing with natural and technological disasters. However, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks prompted renewed efforts to assist nations in also protecting civilian populations against the consequences of attacks with chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear agents. It is not only possible to prepare for the different scenarios, it is essential to prepare. Chemical and biological catastrophes could be the consequence of an accident or a natural disaster. In addition, there are many nuclear plants in Europe, and accidents cannot be excluded. Their consequences do not respect national borders. We also have to take into account the new faces of terrorism.

Had we done a good job on the civil side, we would have been prepared before 9/11. Today, we are catching up. National authorities have the prime responsibility. Some nations do better than others and the advantage of organizations such as NATO, the UN or the EU is that national experiences and best practices can be shared and compared and nations can learn from each other. It is also a good way to develop common approaches. If one nation in the Alliance is particularly skilled in one area, we share this knowledge with the other nations of the Alliance, which is very useful.

***Assistance to victims of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear events would only be feasible using very specific and expensive equipment, and the preparation would be no less expensive. Does NATO have the capacity to deal with such incidents and the ability to provide material and training?***

It is a scenario nobody likes, but unfortunately we have to prepare for it. The threat from chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons (CBRN) must be taken seriously. NATO has worked extensively to help enhance national capabilities and civil preparedness in the event of possible CBRN incidents.

On the civil side, a comprehensive Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council programme on CBRN training and exercises has been developed. Since 2002 an ongoing project has been under way on non-binding guidelines and minimum standards for first responders regarding planning, training, procedures and

equipment for CBRN incidents. The purpose of this initiative is to provide general guidelines that the Council's nations may draw upon on a voluntary basis to enhance their preparedness to protect populations against CBRN risks. Such guidelines also seek to improve interoperability between nations. NATO promotes sharing of information on medical capabilities to cope with large-scale casualties. Its Joint Medical Committee has developed treatment protocols for casualties following a CBRN attack and its Civil Protection Committee has developed public information guidelines for use before, during and after a crisis. These so-called "Budapest Guidelines" are applicable for a crisis involving a CBRN incident. The Transportation Planning Boards and Committees have established mechanisms for co-ordination of nationally provided civil transport resources for Alliance use. Areas where assistance could be provided include mass evacuation of populations, medical evacuation using specially reconfigured civil assets, and national volunteers to transport essential equipment and/or medicines. NATO has also developed a Memorandum of Understanding on the facilitation of vital civil cross-border transport. The main feature of the Memorandum is the acceleration and simplification of existing national border-crossing procedures and customs clearance for international assistance sent in response to a major incident.

On the military side, in 2003 NATO created the Multinational CBRN Defence Battalion to help protect soldiers with a fast, flexible, deployable unit and potentially also assist civilian authorities. The battalion can conduct reconnaissance operations to detect CBRN substances and can assist in decontamination operations. The main aim is to provide a credible CBRN defence capability, primarily to deployed NATO joint forces and commands.

***What does NATO do to evaluate and improve its capabilities in this area? Are they directly related to such scenarios?***

NATO's activities on the civilian side focus mainly on the promotion of minimum standards of preparedness for first responders through the adoption of common guidelines, training programmes and exercises. We have exercises every year where the Disaster Response Co-ordination Centre engages in relevant scenarios in a partner country, and these exercises are being evaluated and serve as a basis for improvements. The last civil emergency exercise was held in Croatia in May 2007. It was essentially a biological scenario. The purpose of these exercises is to improve or to strengthen the capacity of nations to deal with emergency situations and also to test handling of international assistance. Through exercising, we can promote co-ordination and interoperability.

***Does NATO co-ordinate its activities with other international organizations?***

NATO, as an international organization, has close contacts with the UN and other major relief organizations. Until recently, the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs had a liaison officer permanently detached to the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Co-ordination Centre. One of the most important aspects of co-operation is to be informed about the activities of the various actors involved in disaster relief. Co-operation with other international organizations is

therefore very high on NATO's agenda. NATO has decided that every year a large international exercise should enhance co-operation with as many players as are willing to participate.

Every major emergency overstretches existing capabilities. The good news is that today, thanks to organizations like the UN, the ICRC, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the World Health Organization and so on, significant progress has been made on the civilian side in terms of potential co-operation.