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Handling a crisis on the scale of Haiti



Many people are hungry and thirsty. Supplies of food and water have been slow getting on to the streets of Port-au-Prince

Troops, doctors and aid workers are flowing into Haiti, while nations pledge millions of dollars in aid. But how do you handle a crisis of this magnitude? Richard Gordon and Mike Evans of the Bournemouth University Disaster Management Centre, outline the planning and potential pitfalls of such an operation.

WHO IS IN CHARGE?

A fundamental principle of disaster management and international assistance is that it is the stricken country's responsibility to take the lead in inviting in international assistance (via the UN resident representative), and then co-ordinating that assistance to best effect.

In most cases, however, the host government to a greater or lesser extent, will have been incapacitated by the natural disaster, so the UN sends in Disaster and Assessment Coordination teams (UNDACS) to provide initial coordination of international assistance. UNDAC teams tend to deploy for no more than three weeks and then like to hand over once again to the host government. But this may not be long enough for the Haitian government to resume control of its own affairs.

The request for international assistance for Haiti will have been speeded up by the presence of UN troops and other agencies already on the ground.

The US has offered its assistance, in addition to the UN's in-country co-ordination teams. This will provide a significant logistical and command and control element. However, there are likely to be incidents of disagreement between US military and international governments and aid agencies on the ground, as priorities and objectives are set and implemented on Haiti's behalf.

CO-ORDINATION OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

International assistance is co-ordinated in "cluster groups" to ensure that essential aspects of the disaster response are properly co-ordinated and monitored. In Haiti, these cluster groups include:

HAITI EARTHQUAKE

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A plane packed with assorted aid arrives in Port-au-Prince

The UN has a concept of On Site Operations and Co-ordination Centre (OSOCC), which aims to provide that sort of tactical co-ordination to bring together international aid agencies and local government and community representatives.

In the past, there have been issues of who co-ordinates whom. The US is generally suspicious of UN personnel, and NGOs don't generally like to be co-ordinated by military - or by other NGOs for that matter.

The US lead will need to be sensitive in how it deals with these groups and, in particular, how it allows the dissemination of information between agencies. Too often, the military tendency to designate vital information as "restricted" or higher makes it impossible for troops and officers on the ground to share this information with local responders and aid agencies.

COMMUNICATIONS

A fundamental principle of disaster management is that communications (telephones, mobiles) will fail and, therefore, a back-up needs to be planned. This is very seldom carried out in practice, and in the case of Haiti will have been impossible. Aid agencies will come with their own satellite phones and internet uplinks; the military will have their own comms. For Haiti's people, there will be very little to use to communicate with one another (lack of electricity, land lines, mobiles systems) and their vital need to talk to each other to confirm who is alive or dead will be frustrated. Organisations such as Telephones without Frontiers will make a vital contribution in providing a limited access for users.



Mobile communication is hampered by lack of signal and electricity

DISASTER VICTIM IDENTIFICATION

According to Ian Hanson, Bournemouth University Centre for Forensics, a vital component of disaster management is identification of the dead and injured. There is a danger that with the use of mass graves to remove rotting corpses, many people will never be identified. On top of this, a significant number of people will never be found. Middle and long term psychological stress disorders will be prevalent.

Governments will be demanding that their ambassadors in Haiti get out to find out where their own citizens are, says Mr Hanson. Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) requires the careful collection of post-mortem data from a body and then matching it to existing ante-

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mortem data. In the case of international citizens in Haiti such ante-mortem data will include dental records, X-rays, fingerprints, and possibly facial recognition. DVI activity after the Indonesian tsunami in 2005 revealed that some 80% of positive IDs were from finger prints or odontology or a combination of the two. Kenyon International and other established organisations are deploying to Haiti to assist in this.

For Haitians, there is likely to be an almost total lack of ante-mortem data because standard dental or fingerprint records may not exist. Visual records and identification will be their best chance, however this will become impossible if bodies are left too long before being recovered. The cost of excavating collapsed buildings for the Haitians with limited equipment is also prohibitive in the recovery of bodies, as is the cost of putting a body through an identification process. Many Haitians may never be identified but memorialised in some way. This is part of the reflection of the cost, political will, resources and technical skills available for poorer nations versus rich nations. As with other areas of disaster preparedness and response, there is a gap between who gets identified, if they can be, and where they are from.



A body lies among the debris

SECURITY

Security is always a big issue in managing disasters. The maintenance of public order is a national responsibility. If, or when, the problems exceed the police capacity to handle them - which is probably already the case in Haiti - then the military are normally called in.

The Haitian police and military will both have suffered significant casualties - as has the already weak government.

There is a very high risk that, unless aid gets through much faster to the needy, there will probably be a major breakdown in law and order. This could raise very serious issues with foreign national forces - the US in particular - who are armed and who may be forced to use arms to protect themselves.

Security of routes is essential, as it is roads that become the essential lifelines for logistical support and the movement of essential relief to where it is needed.

Roads are being blocked at present and it appears that the police are unable to deploy in sufficient strength to maintain route security.



UN soldiers patrol the ruined streets of Port-au-Prince

As a result, the development of a co-ordinated security plan that uses local police as well as US military and UN troops will need careful co-ordination and agreed rules of engagement for outbreaks of public disorder.

CROSS-BORDER CO-OPERATION

Haiti has a land border with the Dominican Republic. Disaster management planning includes the prior agreement of cross-border co-operation protocols to ensure that assistance is not stockpiled at the border unable to cross over owing to import/export regulations which have not been previously sorted.



Supply trucks from the Dominican Republic arrive in Haiti

LESSONS FROM PREVIOUS EARTHQUAKES

Two key lessons will apply - among others, but these are the two most



important:

- Survivors want to stay close to where they lived - to be moved into camps is not a favoured option for survivors but it is often the selected option for governments because control is much easier.
- A very difficult decision will be reached in the next few days - when to stop trying to find live bodies and to bring in heavy machinery to clear rubble. Trapped victims dehydrate and die after about four-to-seven days, sooner if seriously injured.

Possibly also worth noting that studies into previous earthquakes indicate that epidemics are not the great threat that media often make them out to be. Good quality water is a key.

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