

# **Federal Emergency Management Agency Emergency Management Institute**

## **Investigation of the Political Implications of Disasters Requiring International Assistance**

**Damon Coppola, MEM Crisis, Disaster and Risk Management**

### **Abstract:**

Nations provide bilateral humanitarian assistance in response to major disasters in myriad ways, with direct cash donations constituting only a small percentage of the total assistance given. This aid is widely hailed for its humanitarian motives and lifesaving and life-sustaining outcomes. In addition, under the right circumstances, bilateral humanitarian assistance can provide diplomatic and political gains to both donor and recipient that extend far beyond any immediate relief and recovery benefits. This paper explores bilateral humanitarian assistance with an emphasis on the considerations donor nations face as they formulate offers of assistance and contemplations made by recipient nations as they determine whether or not to accept such offers.

## Introduction

Bilateral humanitarian assistance is the disaster-related financial, technical, in-kind, or other response- and recovery-related aid one government provides to another government. While such provisions may appear straightforward, they typically carry significant implications for both donor and recipient. As such, careful consideration must be made by both donor and recipient prior to any negotiated transaction.

Complex humanitarian emergencies often receive extensive public scrutiny, legislative debate, and media coverage.<sup>1,2</sup> As a result, any official government assistance, or interventions as they are often termed, is almost sure to be immediately swept up in the related political controversy. The result is that the majority of research on the political implications of disaster assistance deals with complex humanitarian emergencies. However, the stakes for governments can be just as high in the case of natural and technological disasters. The spectacular nature of many of these disaster events can mean that the political implications of bilateral assistance can be more difficult to recognize, understand, and accurately assess. This paper will look at common factors governments can look to when faced with the decision to provide or receive assistance in non-complex disaster events. In doing so, it seeks to help streamline the disaster assistance decision making process and to reduce unintended consequences of bilateral assistance.

The United States Government faced a situation following Hurricane Katrina where response systems appeared to be – and in some cases actually were – overwhelmed. The international community responded with hundreds of offers of assistance, including people, supplies, equipment, and cash. Ultimately, all but a small amount of the assistance was declined. The event highlighted several systemic weaknesses, including that there were not adequate processes in place to quickly and efficiently request, accept, and manage offers of international assistance. Furthermore, as Federal catastrophic planning efforts have shown, the United States faces an increasing likelihood that it will experience a disaster incident requiring large-scale acceptance of international humanitarian assistance. Efforts to address many of these systemic weaknesses

---

<sup>1</sup> A Complex Humanitarian Emergency is defined by the United Nations Interagency Steering Committee (IASC) as being, “a humanitarian crisis in a country, region, or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from the internal and/or external conflict and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency” (United Nations. 2003. Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies. <http://coe-dmha.org/Media/Guidance/3MCDAGuidelines.pdf>).

<sup>2</sup> Public and media reactions to governmental response to CHEs, which have included (for example) genocide in Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, and Sudan, and which have resulted in actions that range from the provision of basic commodities to participation in long-term peace-keeping operations, have proven highly contentious for the donor governments in virtually all instances. Given that these actions are billed as being in response to a humanitarian need, governments must face the difficult question of ‘*why are you involved in helping those impacted by this emergency, but not helping in that emergency?*’

have already begun through cooperative efforts between the Departments of Homeland Security and State. Yet the fact remains that in the aftermath of such incidents, politics will play a central role in determining how the government will respond to the onslaught of offers from countries with which the United States has varying relationships. This paper looks at the political implications of international humanitarian assistance for both donor and recipient countries. It will also explore the political implications of the United States having to accept international assistance – even as it continues to be regarded as the world’s leading *provider* of such assistance – and the motivations of countries that would offer such assistance to the United States.

### **Bilateral Humanitarian Assistance is Foreign Policy**

The goal of all nations’ foreign policy is, with few exceptions, to act according to a defined and cohesive strategy that seeks to establish national security, strong economic standing, and political influence. Bilateral assistance, by its very nature, is a tool of foreign policy and therefore must address or meet its overarching goals to some degree. Just as it is often said that ‘all disasters are political’, it is also true that all bilateral offers of humanitarian disaster assistance are political. Because each nation is limited by its national budget, governments have no choice but to act selectively when it comes to humanitarian aid. And because there will always be domestic needs that go unmet due to budgetary constraints, a debate will arise over whether or not bilateral offers of assistance are in the best interests of the donor country. Despite that offers of assistance may be otherwise perceived as purely humanitarian on the part of one nation to another, donors and recipients must view the underlying intentions behind the decision to help through the filter of diplomacy and foreign policy goals. The most forthright indication of this appears in the guidance behind a policy which allows US Ambassadors stationed overseas to immediately release \$50,000 in emergency aid to help their affected host country and which states that the assistance must qualify as being “in the best interest of the US Government”<sup>3</sup>. There are no minced words in such language.

### **How Governments Provide Disaster Assistance**

Direct cash donations constitute only a small percentage of bilateral disaster assistance, even though such assistance is almost always measured and presented in monetary terms. National governments typically formulate what assistance they will offer according to the disaster type, the needs of the recipient government and/or population, and the nature of their own emergency management capabilities and capacity. Donor governments provide assistance in a multitude of ways that go beyond direct cash or materials handover. Assistance may come in the form of consumable products, equipment, building materials, transportation, labor, technical assistance,

---

<sup>3</sup> When a disaster is declared in a foreign nation, the U.S. ambassador (or the Department of State, if one does not exist), through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), is authorized to immediately disburse \$50,000 in emergency aid that is disbursed at the ambassador’s discretion to meet immediate relief needs. However, the following three criteria must first be satisfied for this to occur: 1) The magnitude of the disaster is beyond the capacity of the host country to respond; 2) The host country accepts, or is willing to accept, assistance; and 3) A response is in the best interest of the US Government.

or debt relief, among others. The areas of non-cash bilateral donations that are currently tracked by the United Nations, and which are grouped by sector, can provide significant insight into how governments help. These areas include<sup>4</sup>:

Donor	Commitments/contributions (USD)	% of Grand Total
Food	4,497,287,093	40.4%
Multi-sector	1,654,022,925	14.9%
Health	1,012,681,345	9.1%
Coordination and support services	764,448,209	6.9%
Sector not yet specified	706,037,786	6.3%
Sanitation and non-food items	507,312,249	4.6%
Water and sanitation	454,122,796	4.1%
Agriculture	396,805,940	3.6%
Protection/human rights/rule of law	388,461,333	3.5%
Economic Recovery and Infrastructure	374,512,729	3.4%
Mine action	198,267,755	1.8%
Education	171,622,342	1.5%
Security (of staff and operation)	8,671,506	0.1%
<b>Grand total, USD</b>	<b>11,134,254,008</b>	<b>100%</b>

The UN often is the central recipient of donated funds, goods, and services through the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP)<sup>5</sup>. Assistance may be provided through a regional multilateral organization, such as the Organization of American States or the African Union, which may coordinate the response to one or more of the affected countries within its field of influence. Finally, governments may donate directly to nongovernmental organizations that in turn provide the services or deliver the goods required to carry out the disaster response and recovery.

### *Monetary Assistance*

<sup>4</sup> Financial Tracking Service. 2011. Total Contributions Per Sector: 2010. UNOCHA. [http://fts.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha\\_16\\_2010.PDF](http://fts.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha_16_2010.PDF).

<sup>5</sup> The Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) allows humanitarian aid organizations to plan, implement, and monitor their activities. These organizations can work together to produce a Common Humanitarian Action Plan and an appeal for a specific disaster or crisis, which they present to the international community and donors. The CAP fosters closer cooperation between governments, donors, aid agencies, and many other types of humanitarian organizations. It allows agencies to demand greater protection and better access to vulnerable populations, and to work more effectively with governments and other actors. The CAP is initiated in three types of situations:

1. When there is an acute humanitarian need caused by a conflict or a natural disaster
2. When the government is either unable or unwilling to address the humanitarian need
3. When a single agency cannot cover all the needs

A Consolidated Appeal (CA) is a fundraising document prepared by several agencies working to outline annual financing requirements for implementing a CHAP. Although governments cannot request funding through the CA, NGOs can make a request as long as their proposed project goals are in line with CHAP priorities. The CA is usually prepared by the HCs in September or October, and then launched globally by the UN Secretary General at the Donor's Conference held each November. The CA lasts as long as is necessary for funding purposes, usually a year or more. (Coppola, Damon. 2011. Introduction to International Disaster Management. Elsevier Press. Burlington. P. 590.)

Cash is the easiest, and often the most desperately needed, form of assistance governments can provide in a disaster's immediate aftermath. It requires the least amount of effort for the donor nation and can help offset much of the cost of response efforts and supplies, as well as repair and reconstruction expenditures, which can be staggering and add up to a significant percentage of a country's annual income.

Donor governments offering cash to affected nations have a range of delivery options. If the recipient country has a recognized government known to be relatively free from corruption and found to be able to carry out the necessary tasks involved in response and recovery, the funds may be given directly to the recipient government. However, this is not always the wisest or most efficient choice. In countries where the UN has a strong presence and history of development work, one of the UN agencies (most commonly the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) typically assumes the coordination role and manages the collection and disbursement of donated funds. Multilateral regional organizations may play a similar role. Donor nations may also provide cash directly to the nongovernmental organizations, whether local or international, that are likely to carry out the bulk of humanitarian work performed.

Bilateral loans are another option for governments that do not wish or cannot afford to give grants with no repayment obligations. Though affected nations borrow money from international financial institutions (IFIs) in a disaster's aftermath, this option might not be available or it may not cover all of the financial needs. In these situations, other nations will often step in to cover these shortfalls (usually at a higher interest rate than might be possible with the IFIs).

### ***Equipment / Supplies***

A second, and perhaps even more significant, form of bilateral disaster assistance is donated equipment or supplies. In times of disaster, many items are needed in much greater numbers than during nonemergency times, and local supplies are quickly exhausted. Examples include:

- Food
- Water
- Medical tools and supplies
- Vaccines
- Pharmaceuticals
- Clothing
- Housing materials/tents
- Plastic sheeting
- Blankets
- Cooking/cleaning/water storage/hygiene supplies
- Fuel

- Ice
- School supplies

Certain types of equipment are also needed in much greater supply for response actions and for recovery. Donor governments often send experts to operate the equipment during the emergency period of the disaster and train citizens of the affected nation to operate the equipment so that it can be left behind for reconstruction efforts. Examples of equipment commonly lent or donated in the response and recovery to disasters include:

- Short-range transportation equipment (helicopters, trucks, tankers)
- Long-range transportation equipment (airlifts, charter flights)
- Moving/loading equipment (forklifts, cranes, tractors)
- Generators
- Refrigerators
- Utility repair equipment
- Field hospitals/morgues
- Water purification equipment
- Water pumps

### ***Technical Expertise***

Experts are needed in post-disaster settings to save lives, limit property damage, and reconstruct affected communities. While much of this expertise is directly associated with emergency and disaster management, some skills and talents are used in non-disaster times but are in greater demand in the mass casualty, mass damage setting of disaster response and in the construction and planning needs of the recovery phase.

In the emergency phase that immediately follows many sudden-onset disasters, the most celebrated and recognizable group of experts that respond to disasters worldwide are the members of various search-and-rescue teams. Following earthquakes in which many buildings have collapsed, landslides in populated areas where buildings are buried, or in other events where people are otherwise trapped, the affected government may lack adequate resources to reach all survivors in the critical first hours and days when chances for survival are greatest. The assistance of these international teams has been instrumental in saving many lives that otherwise might have been lost. Search-and-rescue teams are active in dozens of countries throughout the world, and can deploy around the world, with all of their equipment, within 12 to 24 hours. Other expertise often provided by governments in a disaster's aftermath include the following:

- Medical response
- Public health
- Transport and heavy lifting

- Engineering
- Mass feeding
- Coordination support
- Utility repair and reconstruction
- Security (usually military)
- Damage and needs assessment
- Mortuary affairs

### **Types of National Government Agencies Involved in Bilateral Assistance Offers**

Any national government may have several agencies involved in international emergency and disaster management efforts. Many agencies have a specific focus or expertise to assist in humanitarian efforts or to help another nation reduce their hazard risk, either before or after a disaster occurs. The most common types of national agencies involved in international disaster management include:

#### ***Overseas Diplomatic Missions (Embassies and Consulates)***

Often, a donor country's first contact with an affected country is through their embassy or consulate. The embassies and consulates themselves, or the diplomatic residences, warehouses, and other structures, may have been directly affected by the consequences of the disaster. Embassies provide assessments of the situation to their own government, which may extend an offer of humanitarian assistance to the affected country's government through the ambassador. Embassies participate in response by assisting their citizens who are traveling or living in the affected country. They also assist in the logistics and coordination of donated goods and services. In many cases, high-ranking political figures from the donor country will make a humanitarian visit to the affected country, and the embassy staff organizes these visits.

#### ***International Development Agencies***

Many developed countries have been involved in international assistance for decades. Although disaster management and risk reduction have never been these agencies' primary focus, many governments have come to realize that their projects would enjoy much more sustainable outcomes if they could account for the various risk factors affecting the recipient country, and that disasters very often impeded and even reversed development in poor countries. Disaster resilience has come to be viewed as a component of a nation's overall development. Development agencies have several options to help poor nations decrease their hazard risk. These options fall primarily under the emergency management functions of mitigation, preparedness, and recovery, and include:

- Projects addressing issues that are not disaster related per se but include the condition that a full hazard assessment be performed and that the project design fully address disaster resilience enhancement based on the assessment's findings
- Funding for projects that directly address specific mitigation and preparedness needs, such as developing early warning systems, strengthening building stock and infrastructure, and educating the public about actions to reduce their personal risk
- Technical assistance and funding to national and local governments to help develop disaster management frameworks and increased capacity
- Post-disaster recovery assistance requiring that any reconstruction must directly address hazard risk reduction

In most cases, a country's international development agency has the lead responsibility for their government's response to an international disaster. Designated offices of humanitarian assistance within these agencies, such as the US Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), respond to appeals for aid from affected countries. These international development agencies normally have a pre-established working relationship with either the affected nation's government or the UN and other nongovernmental and international organizations working in the country.

### ***National Disaster Management Agencies***

Governments also can offer assistance to disaster-affected countries through their national disaster management agencies. As with international development agencies, national disaster management agencies may offer assistance in any of the four phases of emergency management. Their exact role depends on their country's statutory authority guiding who has jurisdiction for providing international assistance.

In general, national disaster management agencies do not provide as much assistance as development agencies do. They may provide operational assistance in the form of specialized teams (such as search and rescue, emergency medical, assessment, and other teams) during disaster response. But they primarily offer technical assistance to help other countries establish their national disaster management capability during the mitigation and preparedness phases.

### ***Military Resources***

Military resources may be involved in bilateral humanitarian missions for many different reasons. It often is argued that nobody is better equipped to handle disasters than the military because of their extensive logistics expertise, wide assortment of heavy equipment, enormous reserve of trained personnel, and common culture of discipline and mission-oriented standard operation. However, some believe that the military is a war agency, not a humanitarian

assistance agency, and that these two organizational ideals are too fundamentally or even diametrically opposed in practice to allow for effective military involvement.

Apart from fighting wars, military resources traditionally were only used in peacekeeping operations. But it is becoming more and more common for governments to lend their military resources, including troops, equipment, and information, to assist a nation or nations affected by a major disaster. This government entity is very well trained and equipped to work in the high-intensity and high-stress environment of a disaster's aftermath and recovery. Military assistance may include providing food, technical assessment, medical treatment, transportation logistics, assistance with a refugee crisis, search and rescue, stabilization of infrastructure, security, sheltering, or engineering, among many other tasks.

## **The Political Implications of Bilateral Humanitarian Assistance**

### ***Maintenance of Effective Command and Control***

Even in the most extreme circumstances, disaster-affected national governments strive to maintain some semblance of operational command and control. Such efforts are their sovereign right, even in the event that international organizations (e.g., the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) are requested or otherwise become involved in the coordination of the vast international response. However, for many donor governments' agencies and personnel, falling under host country command and control may not be the desired course of action, and it may not even be an option in cases of military assistance. While NGOs are rarely obliged to participate in any such structures, governments are party to an accepted framework of international law that dictates bilateral relations, and as such cannot simply enter uninvited and begin working in a vacuum. For the donor government, the primary concern will be determining whether the affected government is: 1) capable of directing operations; 2) maintaining a safe and secure working environment; 3) maintaining effective situational awareness; and 4) directing assistance in such a way as to ensure it is fair and equitable.

Recipient governments must understand that in the absence of any of these four aforementioned factors, there may be an attempt on the part of donors to work outside or parallel to the established command structure. In the event that a donor government is permitted to (or is otherwise successful in their efforts to) operate independently of the national government, or even in place of it, the affected government faces a crisis of credibility. Such a crisis exceeds the simple loss of situational control. In fact, even a partial transfer or loss of control has resulted in perceptions of incompetence or negligence on the part of the affected population and other participating donor nations. Ultimately, the political impact of such scenarios is highly damaging. The recent (2010) earthquake in Haiti, in response to which the United States Military assumed operational control of the Toussaint L'Ouverture airport<sup>6</sup>, provides an example

---

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Military requested, and was granted the request, to assume control of the airport in order to manage the transport logistics of international humanitarian assistance

of such a situation. Immediately following the transfer of operational control of this key facility, several other donor nations immediately accused the Haitian government of ‘playing favorites,’ and French response officials went as far as to call the airport a “U.S. annex.”<sup>7</sup> This clearly weakened the standing of the Government of Haiti both in the short-term with regards to impressions of their situational control, and ultimately with irreparable consequences in the longer term given election that followed.

Of related concern is the risk that donor government response staff will be unfamiliar with local response structures, policies, practices, terminology, and equipment. For instance, any responders participating in a US response would presumably have to be aware of, and better yet, trained in, the Incident Command System (ICS), the National Incident Management System (NIMS), and other coordination, command, and control mechanisms as required by location. Responders may also be unfamiliar with response structures if their country of origin has a differing government structure in place, or if their emergency management leadership structure is different. Response standards, including those related to privacy, ethics, medical safety, responder safety, among others, would also have to be locally appropriate, and it would be contingent upon both the donor and recipient governments to ensure that alignment between the two occurred with regards to these factors. In the response to Hurricane Katrina, the Government of Singapore offered the support of four Chinook heavy-lift rotary winged aircraft that were, at the time, already stationed in Texas with the air national guard. The responders assigned to the helicopters had been operating in the United States for joint training and exercises, and were, therefore, very familiar with US command, control, and coordination procedures. The United States Government accepted this offer, and each aircraft was commanded by a US Military officer assigned to ride along on the missions conducted. It should be understood, however, that the same level of comfort would not likely exist in the majority of similar situations that presented.

### ***Image of ‘Weakness’ Among the Public, or by the International Community***

Very closely related to the previous implication is the fear that *any* acceptance of foreign assistance will result in public impressions that the affected government is unable to manage the needs of its people. The mere act of declaring an international disaster is, after all, an admission of exceeded capabilities, and a clear indication of vulnerability. Governments may be acutely concerned with “saving face,” with key policymakers believing that the refusal of assistance or to share information may help to downplay the disaster and give the illusion of adequate capability. It is for this reason, it is believed, that the Government of China traditionally kept tight control over information pertaining to disaster fatalities. This practice, which did not cease until September of 2005, made the assessment of disaster magnitude almost impossible for outside response agencies. Another notorious example of face-saving occurred in Japan

---

<sup>7</sup> Carroll, Rudy. 2010. *US Accused of Annexing Airport as Squabbling Hinders Aid Effort in Haiti*. The Guardian. January 17. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/17/us-accused-aid-effort-haiti>

following the 1995 Kobe earthquake, when international search-and-rescue teams were denied entry for many days, closing the window of time when they could have been most effective. Russia exhibited similar behavior in 2000, when the Kursk submarine sank following an on-board training-related explosion. Rescue assistance immediately offered by the British, American, and Norwegian governments was refused given the embarrassment the event had already caused for the Russian Military. All of Russia's attempts to raise the vessel failed, and only on the fifth day were foreign government resources requested (at which point all 118 sailors on board had already perished)<sup>8</sup>. Ultimately, the likelihood that any crew would have been rescued was low, but earlier acceptance of international assistance would have greatly improved international sentiment towards Russia and then-President Vladimir Putin in the long-term.

### ***Maintenance of Forceful Population Control***

Nations that are oppressive and maintain closed borders may also refuse assistance for fear of outside influence that rescuers may introduce. This is said to be the reason why Russia denied the entry of Japanese rescuers after the 1995 Sakhalin Island earthquake. In this instance, the Government of Russia was reportedly worried that Japan would use its access to take control of the island. In 2008, during and immediately after Cyclone Nargis, the Government of Burma was accused of extreme hindrance of international humanitarian efforts to reach and help an estimated 1.5 million people who were affected. The ruling military junta, which is characterized by its oppressive control over its population, prevented thousands of bilateral and international / nongovernmental humanitarian response officials from crossing into the country. Ultimately over 135,000 people were killed or remain missing<sup>9</sup>. Despite that the event was the most deadly cyclone to have occurred anywhere in the world in almost 40 years, and was the most devastating disaster in Burma's history, the government did not accept international aid until after a full week had passed. Even then, governments and organizations were required to drop off their donated goods at the airport or other ports of entry to be managed (without oversight) by a military known for highly corrupt practices. Two and a half weeks after the disaster struck, and with millions facing starvation and exposure, a limited number of NGOs from within the region were allowed to begin providing humanitarian assistance. This event led to accusations that the junta had committed crimes against humanity and other international condemnation for their blocking of international relief. Unfortunately, such criticisms have done little to change the attitudes of this repressive regime and the same would likely be repeated in a future event<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> BBC Europe. 2000. The Kursk Disaster: Day by Day. August 24. BBC Website. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/894638.stm>

<sup>9</sup> Elaine Pearson, the Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch, stated that, "Restraints on aid delivery and oppressive election regulations targeting opposition political parties show that the junta's mindset emphasizes maintenance of control over the well-being of its citizens" (Agency France Presse. 2010. Myanmar Aid Barriers Hinder Cyclone Recovery. AFP. April 29. [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ihDI3FUW\\_Oc5youSgxzGEbA-v7xA](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ihDI3FUW_Oc5youSgxzGEbA-v7xA)

<sup>10</sup> De Meulles, Leslie. 2008. Complicated Compassion: Trusting the Junta with Foreign Aid. Le Panoptique. July 1. <http://www.lepanoptique.com/sections/politique-economie/complicated-compassion-trusting-the-junta-with-foreign->

### ***Protection of State Sovereignty***

Perhaps the most oft-cited reason that foreign aid is refused, at least in the initial hours of a disaster, is confusion relating to customs and visa regulations. To ensure the proper flow of people and products in and out of a country, governments establish customs and visa frameworks that are based upon agreements with foreign governments. Typically, these systems are designed to operate in a controlled, non-disaster environment, and they depend upon bureaucratic processes that have developed over time. In times of disaster, during the initial hours and days when life saving and sustaining resources are most needed, these same systems can pose immediate and insurmountable roadblocks to both donor and recipient governments. Following the 2007 magnitude 8.0 earthquake in Peru, many bilateral offers of assistance were offered and accepted. However, strict customs and visa regulations held up responders, vehicles, equipment, and other supplies<sup>11</sup>. Following the 2011 magnitude 9.0 earthquake in Japan, search and rescue teams from the United States and Switzerland were held up needlessly because strict regulations dictating the import of animals into Japan held up the release of the highly-trained dogs upon which the teams depend<sup>12</sup>. In September of 2010, the Secretary General of the World Customs Organization, Kunio Mikuriya, and Rashid Khalikov, director of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in an effort to support and encourage UN member states to apply simplified customs procedures to speed up the delivery of international humanitarian assistance. However, many governments will be hesitant to sign onto any such convention they feel undermines their sovereign right to conduct control over whom and what enters even during major disaster events.

### ***Ideological Compatibility of Donor and Recipient***

Nations with a history of political rancor also have been known to offer each other, and similarly refuse from each other, offers of humanitarian assistance in times of disaster. Such offers, it must be suspected, are made with at least a secondary intention of either discrediting the affected country's government or to serve as a propaganda tool aimed at engendering good will towards the donor among the affected population. Cuba and the United States, who are long-time political adversaries, regularly offer each other humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of disasters (most often hurricanes), but almost without exception this aid is refused. Similarly, the government of Venezuela, a vocal opponent of western governments, regularly offers heating oil to the people of the United States and Europe<sup>13</sup>.

---

[aid.](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/161_burma_myanmar_after_nargis_time_to_normalise_aid_relations.ashx); International Crisis Group. 2008. Burma/Myanmar After Nargis: Time to Normalize Aid Relations. Asia Report Number 161. October 20. [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/161\\_burma\\_myanmar\\_after\\_nargis\\_time\\_to\\_normalise\\_aid\\_relations.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/161_burma_myanmar_after_nargis_time_to_normalise_aid_relations.ashx)

<sup>11</sup> Bridges, Tyler. 2008. A Case for the Law. The Magazine of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. [http://www.redcross.int/EN/mag/magazine2011\\_1/10-13.html](http://www.redcross.int/EN/mag/magazine2011_1/10-13.html)

<sup>12</sup> Goodman, Russell. 2011. Foreign Rescue Team Delayed By Japanese Bureaucracy. ABC News. May 23. <http://abcnews.go.com/m/story?id=13126904&sid=76>

<sup>13</sup> Hugo Chavez announced his offer of cheap fuel oil to citizens in London while simultaneously issuing an 'obituary for the American empire'. Chavez was successful in delivering cheap fuel oil to many poor American families in

However, there have also been situations where political rivals have been able to put aside their differences in the face of a humanitarian emergency, oftentimes termed “Disaster Diplomacy<sup>14</sup>”, which is exactly what occurred following the 2005 South Asian earthquake. Longtime rivals India and Pakistan allowed each other’s governments and citizens to provide region-wide assistance in disputed Kashmir, despite decades of ongoing violence in the affected area<sup>15</sup>. Another surprising incident where humanitarian assistance was used as a diplomatic tool to bridge longstanding rivalries occurred when China assisted Japan following the 2011 magnitude 9.0 earthquake and subsequent tsunami. Despite that these two countries had experienced highly-visible disputes as recently as 6-months prior to the event<sup>16</sup>, China offered and Japan accepted multiple response resources (including search and rescue teams, cash donations, information and communications technology, and more)<sup>17</sup>. Such offers can be a creative and effective way to cool tensions that both countries have been otherwise unsuccessful in addressing. It can also be a means through which countries throughout the region, and the world, are able to join together in solidarity for a good cause. This is exactly what occurred following the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami events when India and Pakistan came together to help badly-impacted Sri Lanka<sup>18</sup>.

---

what he felt was a successful embarrassment of the US President. (The Observer. 2006. Chavez Offers Oil to Europe’s Poor. The UK Guardian. May 14. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/may/14/oil.venezuela>.

<sup>14</sup> I. Kelman (2011) writes on the “Disaster Diplomacy: How Disasters Affect Peace and Conflict” that there are three likely outcomes from disaster diplomacy: “1) In the short-term--on the order of weeks and months--disaster-related activities can, but do not always, impact diplomacy. Disaster-related activities can influence diplomatic activities and spur them on, as long as a pre-existing basis was present for the diplomacy, with examples being cultural connections, trade links, or secret negotiations; 2) Over the long-term--in terms of years--non-disaster factors have a more significant impact on diplomacy than disaster-related activities. Examples are leadership changes, distrust, belief that an historical conflict or grievance should take precedence over present-day humanitarian and peace needs, or priorities for action other than conflict resolution and diplomatic dividends; and 3) Disaster-related activities sometimes have the opposite outcome: they can exacerbate conflict and reduce diplomacy.”

<sup>15</sup> Among other efforts, both countries eased no-fly zones to allow relief helicopters to reach victims, and cross-border travel was eased to allow for the free-flow of reconstruction labor. Pasricha, Anjana. 2005. India, Pakistan No Closer on Kashmir Dispute Despite Earthquake Diplomacy. Relief Web. October 19. <http://reliefweb.int/node/189121>

<sup>16</sup> In September of 2010, Japanese Coast Guard vessels pursued and struck a Chinese fishing vessel that entered the disputed Diaoyu Islands, which both countries claim but which are controlled by Japan (Global Times. 2010. Diaoyu Islands Collision a Dangerous Game. September 8. <http://opinion.globaltimes.cn/editorial/2010-09/571138.html>)

<sup>17</sup> Kent, Jo Ling. 2011. Tensions Aside, China Sends Rescue Team, Money, and Supplies to Japan. CNN. March 14. [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-03-14/world/china.disaster.response\\_1\\_china-quake-china-earthquake-administration-qinghai?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-03-14/world/china.disaster.response_1_china-quake-china-earthquake-administration-qinghai?_s=PM:WORLD)

<sup>18</sup> The Consortium of Non-Traditional Security Studies in Asia (NTSASIA) describes in its report “Disaster Diplomacy: Sri Lanka Following the Tsunami Devastation” that, “The solidarity of the international community was not confined to their donations, material assistance and expertise assistance in the form of man power. Many leaders of countries across the world endeavoured to make visits personally, to Sri Lanka as an expression of solidarity and to ascertain for themselves the extent of damage. As a result Sri Lanka received dignitaries ranging from Ministers to Prime Ministers of donor countries, former US Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush, Parliamentarians, key

### ***Assignment of Liability, and the Risk of Accident-Related Implications***

Participation in humanitarian assistance is inherently risky work. Both the responders themselves, and the people they are trying to help, may be injured or even killed as a result of their actions and efforts. Additionally, through the responders work, either intentionally or accidentally, property damage can and does occur. Response work is also a skilled profession, and responders represent themselves according to certain standards of training and ability through which a recipient government is able decide whether or not to allow or deny access to the affected population. For both the donor and the recipient governments, there are many questions of where liability for accidents does or should lie, but legal frameworks and statutory authorities typically provide necessary protections only to citizens of the affected nation and domestically-based organizations. So great are these concerns, that in the absence of an acceptable agreement there may be perfectly usable resources that sit idle despite their obvious need.

There also exists liability in connection with disaster assistance related to political capital. If a donor responding government agency or official is involved in an accident that occurs in the course of response, and questions of the nature of the accident (justified or otherwise) significantly raise the media and public profile of the incident, the result can greatly exceed any financial costs incurred. While such an incident is unlikely, the political implications of accidents and even actions can change the very nature of the bilateral relationship in the future, and under the right circumstances could even impact the national security of one or both of the countries impacted. For instance, several search and rescue teams involved in the search for survivors at the famed Hotel Montana which collapsed during the 2010 earthquake in Haiti were accused of very poor performance presumably because they were focusing their search efforts only on those parts of the hotel where it was believed their own citizens were located. And long after it was felt there was no chance of additional survivors being found buried at the hotel, several teams remained in an apparent attempt to salvage cadavers of their country's citizens while Haitians remained buried alive elsewhere in the city. While no legal ramifications resulted from these accusations, the reputation of these search teams, and the intentions of the donor countries, were called into question<sup>19</sup>.

### ***Corruption***

Corruption affects all countries' governments, businesses, and general population to varying degrees, and it is widespread corruption that is often to blame for many of the vulnerabilities that cause humanitarian emergencies in the first place. For instance, corrupt government practices might include (among many more examples):

---

figures from international organizations culminating in a visit by the then United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan."

<sup>19</sup> Associated Press. 2010. Haiti Rescue Efforts for Canadian Citizens Criticized. CBC.CA. January 22. <http://news.ca.msn.com/top-stories/cbc-article.aspx?cp-documentid=23307749>.

- Building inspectors who accept payments to overlook violations;
- Construction contractors who substitute approved building materials for substandard materials that result in structural weaknesses;
- Government employees who embezzle or sidetrack funding earmarked for disaster mitigation or preparedness;
- Government executives misusing loans from the international community, resulting in underdevelopment coupled with high indebtedness;
- Favoritism on the part of the central government towards local leaders with political or other ties in order to secure funding for emergency management activities (leaving those without political favor unable to adequately recover).

Following a disaster, existing corruption patterns do not vanish. In fact, they often increase as monitoring mechanisms become overwhelmed or otherwise hindered, and humanitarian emergencies are characterized by huge inflows of cash and supplies - both of which present new opportunities for corruption. Power has been abused in diverse ways in these situations, ranging from simple theft to systemic rape and murder<sup>20</sup>. Disaster victims have been required to pay assessors to be included on relief and recovery registries; others have had to pay or offer other favors to receive supplies and assistance that had been donated for uncommitted distribution. At times, relief supplies have simply disappeared, presumably into some official's personal possession. International NGOs and governmental agencies inadvertently contribute to this corruption by not fully understanding how such matters affect local politics and society. Ongoing discussions seek ways to reduce or prevent such actions in the future. Corruption not only undermines the work of response and recovery agencies, it also causes additional suffering for victims. Pete Ewans wrote in a report for Transparency International entitled *Mapping the Risks of Corruption in Humanitarian Action* that there are several variables that increase the likelihood that corruption is avoided, including:

- Conflict does not exist;
- There existed low-levels of corruption prior to the event;
- The affected government is effective and transparent, and has in place strong anti-corruption measures;
- There exists a strong legal framework;
- The relief provided has a low relative value;
- Aid actors are seen as legitimate, effective, and meeting urgent needs;
- The aid is transparent and accountable;
- There are high levels of media scrutiny;

---

<sup>20</sup> IRIN. 2010. AID POLICY: Fighting Corruption in Disaster Response. Humanitarian News and Analysis. February 3. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=87971>

- There are strong finance, HR, logistics, and administrative systems in place<sup>21</sup>.

#### Collateral Impacts of Humanitarian Aid

There is a complexity to disaster response that extends far beyond the obvious life safety needs of those impacted (shelter, food, water, and medical care). Without understanding of local conditions, the provision of disaster assistance can actually increase existing problems, or create new ones. In turn, the action may engender negative reactions on the part of the affected communities towards the donor nation responsible. For instance:

- **Competition with similar local materials:** The provision of in-kind construction supplies have in many instances created what is termed “market shock”, wherein sudden glut in supplies eliminates local demand. When construction practices rely too heavily on local materials, the opposite effect, termed “Positive Demand Shock”, wherein local prices skyrocket, can occur.
- **Long-term Dependence:** When in-kind materials and building expertise is introduced to an area that is completely or largely unfamiliar, it may not be easy or even possible for local construction workers to maintain, repair, or replace the structures. They then become dependent upon the donor nation or some other outside entity to do this work for them, resulting in long-term dependencies and reverberating shocks throughout the local markets (wherein residents are no longer purchasing locally-made or available materials and parts). Conversely, utilizing locally available or familiar materials can actually help to support local markets and ensure that local labor is empowered to participate in the recovery effort.
- **Impacts on Livelihoods:** When a donor government brings in all of the labor required to conduct their relief and reconstruction efforts, they can marginalize local citizens who are looking for work and would otherwise benefit greatly from the chance to participate in their own recovery. On the other hand, efforts that rely too heavily on local labor can result in local citizens leaving their regular jobs to participate in recovery work, which is oftentimes better-paying or more prestigious.
- **Inappropriateness of Materials:** In-kind provision of construction materials and other supplies must be appropriate for the climate where the response and recovery work is to occur. The materials must be able to accommodate temperatures, humidity, insects, seismicity, and many other factors.
- **Environmental Impact of Materials:** If a nation supports a significant amount of construction in a short period of time, the demand for materials will be exceptionally high in comparison to normal times. Such demand can lead to severe environmental impacts, including the clear-cutting of forests for wood or improper firing of bricks and

---

<sup>21</sup> Ewins, Pete, Paul Harvey, Kevin Savage, and Alex Jacobs. 2006. Mapping the Risks of Corruption in Humanitarian Action. <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/607.pdf>.

other masonry supplies (which can cause atmospheric pollution and other environmental damages due to the wood and coal required to heat the ovens).

## **Conclusion**

Whether due to natural cycles or human-induced trends, global climate change is occurring and causing stronger and more frequent disasters. As a result the number of countries requiring international humanitarian assistance, and the regularity with which such requests are made, are also growing. In the United States, these same trends demand greater exploration of how foreign assistance could meet shortfalls in response capacities for catastrophic disasters. Whether it be as a donor or recipient, humanitarian assistance by the United States Government requires careful consideration of the potential positive and negative political implications.

## **Author Biography**

Damon Coppola is an emergency management systems engineer with over a decade of practical and training-related experience. Mr. Coppola has provided analysis and technical expertise on emergency management, planning, and policy projects for clients in the public, nonprofit, and private sectors inclusive of FEMA, the National Science Foundation, The World Bank, The United Nations, the National Disaster Preparedness Training Center, various US and foreign state and local governments, among others. Mr. Coppola has also developed and co-developed a number of FEMA and DHS training and education for both the FEMA/EMI Higher Education Program and for the DHS National Training and Education Division, including the 60-hour *National Incident Management Systems*, the 48-hour *Comparative Emergency Management*, the 48-hour *Hazards Risk Management*, the 8-hour *Natural Disaster Preparedness for Security Professionals*, and others. Mr. Coppola currently serves as an adjunct faculty member at the Loma Linda University School of Public Health in the Emergency Management department, where he developed the course curriculum for two graduate level courses including *Economic, Legal, and Policy Issues in Disasters* and *Principles of Emergency Management*, both of which he serves as instructor. Mr. Coppola has authored and co-authored academic and professional emergency management textbooks that are currently in use at over 180 colleges and universities (including *Introduction to International Disaster Management*, *Introduction to Emergency Management*, *Introduction to Homeland Security*, *Communicating Emergency Preparedness: Strategies for Creating a Disaster Resistant Public*, and *Managing Children in Disasters*.) Mr. Coppola holds a Master of Engineering Management (MEM) in Crisis, Emergency, and Risk Management from the George Washington University.