

# Taking Foreign Disaster Response to the Next Level

Ten actions to better prepare for and respond to international disasters

by Maj Laurence Paik & Maj Ty Anthony

In her first visit to the Pentagon as Vice President, Kamala Harris underscored that success against global threats comes from *defense*, *diplomacy*, and *development* working together.<sup>1</sup> These 3Ds—represented by the DOD, Department of State (DOS), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—can be seen as three pillars that provide the foundation for promoting and protecting U.S. national security interests abroad.<sup>2</sup> As Commandant of the Marine Corps Fellows to USAID, we have had the unique opportunity to better understand the *development* pillar and advance efforts to integrate *defense* and *development*.

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The *development* pillar in fact encompasses three distinct competencies that can be characterized as short-term humanitarian assistance, mid-term stabilization and transition, and long-term development. We serve within USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), which is the Lead Federal Agency (LFA) for U.S. Government (USG)

efforts to save lives, alleviate human suffering, and reduce the physical, social, and economic impact for internally displaced persons affected by international disasters.<sup>3</sup> BHA formed in June 2020 when it merged the former Offices of Foreign Disaster Assistance and Food for Peace, and its goal is to ensure that countries and peoples that receive humanitarian assistance can recover, build stable foundations, and become more self-reliant, prosperous, and democratic.

In disaster situations, BHA alerts its globally postured personnel and action-oriented staff in Washington, DC to serve as USAID's "quick reaction force" to achieve the above mandate. BHA also works before disasters strike to implement Disaster Risk Reduction programs in vulnerable countries; these programs serve as a connecting file to USAID's long-term Development programs. To this end, USAID has both Development Advisors and BHA Humanitarian Assistance Advisors to the Military (HAA/Ms) assigned to each Geographic Combatant Command and U.S. Special Operations Command; BHA also forward deploys a HAA/M to III MEF in Okinawa, demonstrating the close relationship that BHA



**The Marine Corps has frequently supported USAID.** (Photo Courtesy Photo U.S. Navy.)

has with the Marine Corps. This close relationship is built on a common foundation: we both deploy on a moment's notice to austere and often dangerous environments, accomplish our mission, and increase our national security while endeavoring to leave the world a better place.

After being trained as HAA/Ms, we instructed DOD civilians and uniformed service members, served on humanitarian assistance responses, supported U.S. Indo-Pacific and Southern Commands, and expanded the breadth and depth of USAID/BHA's interaction with the Marine Corps' Training and Education Command enterprise and FMF. Now nearing the end of our Fellowship, we present the following list of ten actions to better prepare for and respond to international disasters. This list is particularly important to the seventeen units that have the Marine Corps Task "Coordinate Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA),"<sup>4</sup> which includes Foreign Disaster Response (FDR), as well as for MEUs that are most likely to be called upon to execute disaster relief as the President may direct.<sup>5</sup>

Before we present the list, it is important to note that "humanitarian assistance" means different things to different people. To USAID, "humanitarian assistance" specifically refers only to the *short-term response* to an international disaster—activities that save lives, alleviate human suffering, and reduce the physical, social, and economic impact of disasters. This equates most directly to DOD's definition of FDR.<sup>6</sup> To the DOD, "Foreign Humanitarian Assistance" covers a wide spectrum of activities that includes not only short-term response to an international disaster (i.e., FDR) *but also longer-term capacity building* that may not be tied to a disaster. DOD calls the longer-term capacity building efforts "Humanitarian Assistance (HA) Programs,"<sup>7</sup> but USAID considers these activities to be "Development." This article will use "FDR" in reference to DOD's short-term response activities to an international disaster and "humanitarian assistance" in reference to USAID's short-term response activities to an international disaster.



**Forward based and forward deployed Marine forces are often the first to respond to disasters overseas. (Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Aaron Burden.)**

### Getting Ready to Deploy

1. *Integrate USAID/BHA into your exercise lifecycle.* For exercise planners, utilize the interagency request process through Training and Education Command detailed in *MARADMIN 255/14* to request USAID/BHA HAA/Ms to support training exercises with scenario design, scenario inject development, and role playing—all of which is typically free of charge to the Marine Corps. USAID/BHA HAA/Ms are a mix of former uniformed military members and former humanitarians who previously worked with Non-Governmental

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Organizations (NGOs) or the UN and have deep experience in providing humanitarian assistance after both natural and conflict-induced disasters. USAID/BHA has historically supported MEF Exercises, MEU Certification Exercises and Crisis Action Planning Workshops, SPMAGTF pre-deployment training, and Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactic Squadron One Exercises. If you

have any questions as to whether or not BHA can or should be of assistance to your training, email [bha.cmd.fellows@usaid.gov](mailto:bha.cmd.fellows@usaid.gov).

2. *Schedule a Joint Humanitarian Operations Course (JHOC) for you and your staff.* For deploying units, JHOC is designed to give DOD personnel a fundamental understanding of how DOD integrates into the USG in working bilaterally with disaster-affected countries and coordinating with the international humanitarian community. Over four half-days virtually (two days in-person pre-COVID), JHOC covers foreign assistance in general terms, humanitarian assistance in particular, international humanitarian coordination, disaster response examples and case studies, USAID-DOD coordination, and tools and resources. JHOC is not just for logisticians; it is designed for commanders and planners from each MAGTF element, and it is a Joint Staff J7-certified course that awards 0.5 Joint Qualified Officer points. Email [jhoc@usaid.gov](mailto:jhoc@usaid.gov) to schedule JHOC training or contact [bha.cmd.fellows@usaid.gov](mailto:bha.cmd.fellows@usaid.gov) to learn more.

3. *Contact your Combatant Command HAA/Ms.* For deploying units, USAID/BHA's permanently detailed HAA/Ms at each of the Geographic Combatant Commands and Special Operations Command are your experts for FDR mission sets in a particular area of responsibility. The Combatant

Command HAA/Ms closely track disasters and relevant events in the area of responsibility, advise their combatant commanders, contribute to contingency and campaign planning, and—as a disaster strikes—help integrate DOD’s FDR operations into USAID’s humanitarian assistance responses. For applicable units, they can include you on distribution lists for humanitarian information products. Email [bha.cmd.fellows@usaid.gov](mailto:bha.cmd.fellows@usaid.gov) to be put in touch with the appropriate Combatant Command HAA/Ms.

**After Disaster Strikes**

1. *Take action (with caveats) if DOD can conduct life-saving activities.* Occasionally, DOD forces who happen to be on scene can be the difference between life and death for those affected by a foreign disaster. *Department of Defense Directive 5100.46 on Foreign Disaster Relief* (incorporating Change 1 dated July 28, 2017) notes that military commanders with assigned forces *at or near the immediate scene of a foreign disaster* can take prompt action to save human lives, further noting that the commander *should obtain the concurrence of the Host Nation and U.S. Chief of Mission* of the affected country before committing forces (emphasis added).<sup>8</sup> The directive goes on to say that the combatant commander will “follow up

as soon as possible, but no later than 72 hours after the start of relief operations, to secure Secretary of Defense or Deputy Secretary of Defense approval for continuing assistance.”<sup>9</sup>

2. *If activities are not life-saving or assigned forces are not at or near the immediate scene, then wait for the call from USAID.* DOD support is requested in

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only 5–10 percent of USAID/BHA’s international humanitarian assistance responses, which number 50–60 annually. Aside from scenarios that satisfy the conditions in paragraph “4” above, the DOD cannot perform FDR operations for internally displaced persons without being requested by USAID/BHA, which again is the Lead Federal Agency in that context. In other words, it might be helpful to think of USAID/BHA as “supported” and DOD as “supporting” when it comes to FDR.

3. *Avoid mission creep.* The *DODDI 5100.46* specifies that “assistance during

the first 72 hours does not include the authority to provide military assistance that does not contribute to urgent life-saving efforts,” and *Joint Publication 3-29, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, goes further, adding, “therefore, it is particularly important to avoid mission creep in this scenario.”<sup>10</sup> This admonishment to avoid mission creep is especially important for Marines because, as Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen Berger duly noted in his *2019 Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, the Marine Corps does not exist to provide foreign humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; rather, we are the “Nation’s premier naval expeditionary force-in-readiness ... that ensures the prevention of major conflict and deters the escalation of conflict within the [range of military operations].”<sup>11</sup> Rather than doing something because we can, the Marine Corps should allow the capable civilian humanitarian assistance enterprise of local and national governments, local and international NGOs, and the UN to do what they do best, thus allowing the Marine Corps to do what it does best—fight and win.

4. *Rely on the Civil-Military Affairs Coordinator (CMAC).* When a robust USG humanitarian response is required, USAID/BHA deploys a field-based Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART); additionally, when USAID/BHA requests DOD support, USAID/BHA deploys a HAA/M to serve as the DART’s CMAC. CMACs are expert practitioners in coordinating civil-military disaster relief efforts and were selected due to their proven experience working numerous real-world humanitarian responses; often, they have also served a three-year tour as a Combatant Command HAA/M. As DOD’s primary field-based point of contact, the CMAC assists with military planning, facilitates civil-military coordination, and serves as the critical link between military commanders and the DART.

5. *Utilize the Military Tasking Matrix (MITAM).* During a disaster response, the MITAM is USAID’s tool to vet, validate, and approve requests for DOD support such as the movement of humanitarian commodities from one place to another. Whether these requests



**Commanders and staffs must sensitive to the potential for “mission creep” in FHA/DR operations.** (Photo by LCpl Jhonson Simeon.)

originate from the host nation, NGOs, UN agencies such as the World Food Program, or even the U.S. Ambassador, USAID/BHA goes through the MITAM process to ensure that the activities satisfy an unmet humanitarian need and cannot be completed by civilian entities. This is particularly important for commanders to note because only DOD activities tied to a USAID-approved MITAM request are eligible for reimbursement from DOD's Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster Assistance, and Civic Aid funding. DOD activities not approved through the MITAM process are instead funded by the Geographic Combatant Commander's operational funds, thus limiting his resources available for future contingency and combat operations.

### Keep in Mind

1. Remember that the DOD's capabilities should only be used as a last resort in international humanitarian assistance. The civilian humanitarian assistance enterprise of local and national governments, local and international NGOs, and the UN is made up of capable professionals who respond to hundreds of disasters a year globally and provide assistance to those ravaged by both nature and conflict. The vast majority of time, the DOD is asked to provide capabilities that civilian entities actually have but just cannot provide at that moment. These capabilities are typically bulk logistics (via airlift or sealift) or "last mile" transportation of humanitarian commodities such as food and plastic sheeting for shelter to isolated areas (via vertical lift). Once civilian capabilities and lines of communication are restored, DOD support is usually no longer required. Since local responders, local NGOs, and the host nation are always first on scene, this means that DOD units are "last in and first out" except in the occasional life-saving scenario noted in paragraph "4" above.

2. Recognize the different perspectives on the purpose of FDR/humanitarian assistance. DOD typically approaches FDR operations with the goal of achieving the combatant commander's campaign plan objectives or foreign policy objectives more broadly such as to strengthen re-

lationships. USAID/BHA—despite not being a true humanitarian actor since it is a government entity—approaches humanitarian assistance with the four humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence that were endorsed by the UN General Assembly and are practiced by the international humanitarian community.<sup>12</sup> These differing approaches can result in friction between DOD and USAID/BHA during both natural and conflict-related disasters. The easiest way to understand why USAID/BHA takes this approach is to consider how the presence and activities of American military personnel can negatively affect those in need. Particularly in conflict settings, parties opposed to the United States or our foreign policy could cut off vulnerable populations from humanitarian assistance or even attack them directly for receiving it; this would only be exacerbated if the assistance is offered by U.S. military service members, which would be uniformed and armed. USAID/BHA strongly prefers to rely on NGOs and UN agencies who are not associated with United States foreign policy to achieve and sustain the "humanitarian access" needed to reach the most vulnerable populations.

There are many more things to know about civil-military coordination during FDR operations than can be written in a *Marine Corps Gazette* article. If you anticipate that your unit could be called upon to conduct FDR, following this list requires minimal investment but will greatly assist you in preparing for and responding to international disasters. If you have any questions, leverage the Commandant of the Marine Corps Fellows to BHA and email [bha.cmd.fellows@usaid.gov](mailto:bha.cmd.fellows@usaid.gov).

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### Notes

1. Staff, "President Biden Delivers Remarks at the Pentagon," *C SPAN*, (February 2021), available at <https://www.c-span.org>.
2. Department of State, USAID, and DOD, *3D Planning Guide: Diplomacy, Development, Defense*, (Washington DC: July 2012).

3. The Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration is the Lead Federal Agency for humanitarian assistance to refugees because of the inherently political nature of refugee situations; USAID/BHA and DOS/PRM work closely together in providing humanitarian assistance globally.

4. Information available at <https://www.mccdc.marines.mil>; and "Foreign Humanitarian Assistance," s.v., *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, available at <https://www.jcs.mil>. Foreign Humanitarian Assistance is defined as "Department of Defense activities conducted outside the United States and its territories to directly relieve or reduce human suffering, disease, hunger, or privation."

5. Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-29 Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (JP 3-29)*, (Arlington, VA: May 2019).

6. "Foreign Disaster Relief," s.v., *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, available at <https://www.jcs.mil>: Foreign Disaster Relief is defined as "Assistance that can be used immediately to alleviate the suffering of foreign disaster victims that normally includes services and commodities, as well as the rescue and evacuation of victims; the provision and transportation of food, water, clothing, medicines, beds, bedding, and temporary shelter; the furnishing of medical equipment and medical and technical personnel; and making repairs to essential services."

7. Staff, "Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid," Defense Security Cooperation Agency, (n.d.), available at <https://samm.dsca.mil>.

8. Department of Defense, *DODDI 5100.46*, (Washington, DC: July 2012).

9. Ibid.

10. *JP 3-29*.

11. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

12. Staff, "What are Humanitarian Principles?" (New York, NY: UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs, 2019).

