

## Humanitarian Relief Operations & Security: A Role for Defence?

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Since the Boxing Day Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, packages of images of devastation and chaos caused by natural events have become ever more frequent segments on nightly news bulletins. Within Australia our cycle of fire and flooding seems to be increasing in pace and ferocity, and there is now a permanent dialogue about how best to respond to devastating natural events. In the past such events were handled by specialised organisations with their appropriately trained professional and volunteer personnel. But as the images have become bleaker, and our expectation for an immediate large scale response has been transformed into action, it is now normal to see Defence personnel deploying to assist with humanitarian relief operations after a natural disaster. Such activities have not traditionally been part of Defence's core business, which raises some key questions about how Defence should approach its growing role in such activities: how should Defence rethink its definition of core business to enhance doctrinal and organisational integrity? How should Defence operate in humanitarian relief

operations? What training do Defence personnel need to meet this new expectation?

Traditionally, Defence's core business has involved managing and applying violence on behalf of the state, in order to protect the state's sovereignty. Defence's role has involved contributing to the maintenance of state security between and within the community of states, identifying and preparing for external threats to state security, and protecting the state's interests



as defined and required by legitimate political authority. Central to all of these activities is the issue of security, which can be defined in geographical, geopolitical, political, economic, or societal terms. Security is Defence's core business, and how security is defined impacts on

both what Defence is expected to achieve and on what it prepares to achieve.

Security, by its very nature, is multi faceted. Here in Australia security is not an issue that occupies most citizens' attention most of the time. We expect our streets to be reasonably safe, our day to day activities to be reasonably consistent, and to be able to plan for the future with a high degree of certainty. All of this normality, which can be described as security, can be swept away in a matter of minutes by fire, flood, or an earthquake. A catastrophic natural event does not just bring physical devastation: it also brings about a sense of insecurity that has to be managed and transformed in order to re-establish a sense of security.

Such an explanation of security has immediate salience for civil society, but represents a different understanding of security to that which Defence traditionally applies and employs. Defence spends a lot of time planning to identify, target, and eliminate threats, and short periods of time putting such planning into effect. In the modern battle space Defence employs an ever more sophisticated matrix of technology and training in order to rapidly identify and target threats, and makes increasing use of precision munitions and Special Forces to enhance the likelihood of effective threat elimination—with minimal collateral damage.

Security, under these circumstances, depends on identifying and eliminating threats.

Even when this approach to security is extended to encompass providing force protection and population security, Defence still tends to plan and act in terms of identifying, targeting, and eliminating threats. This approach may have worked well enough in earlier wars and peace keeping operations, but in the post 9/11 world of terrorism, tactical and strategic opportunism, insurgency, and counter insurgency, population security is now an end that requires planning and action in its own right.

A superficial continuity does exist for Defence between providing population security during military operations and re-establishing population security as part of any contribution to humanitarian relief operations. Population security is now core business for Defence, because without population security no society can get on with its daily activities in a confident and successful manner.

But even though population security is now a central issue, the different circumstances under which population security has to be achieved ensure that any continuity is only superficial. For example, during counter insurgency operations, intelligence, information operations, special forces, peace keeping, reconstruction, and civil affairs all play their part in achieving Defence's

ends, and there is always the potential for armed conflict to impact on any part of the mission. In contrast, during humanitarian relief operations the crisis event has already happened, and the race is on to re-establish safety, services, and normality. During military operations population security depends on Defence personnel being able to manage and apply violence at any moment, while during humanitarian relief operations the likelihood of needing to manage and apply violence is either unclear or unnecessary. A capacity for violence is central to military operations, and unwanted during humanitarian relief operations.

Expecting Defence personnel to successfully provide population security under such different circumstances is akin to asking them to be masters of several trades with very little room for error. Defence personnel can be trained to do either or both jobs well, but doing so will require political authorities, Defence, and society at large to make decisions about what kind of security Defence should provide, and how they should go about providing it. Expecting Defence personnel to assist with population security during humanitarian relief operations at home is

one thing (where culture, language, and societal norms are clear), but expecting them to do the same in unfamiliar locations beyond our border will either require luck or training. Because Australian Defence personnel have such a good reputation for adapting to new situations and engaging with different populations, we could say that we have had luck on our side so far. In the cold light of today luck is not enough.

In order to achieve their tasked missions Defence personnel need to know what is expected of them and need to have the appropriate training to get the job done in a quantifiable and repeatable manner. As population security requires different approaches in military and humanitarian relief operations we cannot assume that Defence personnel are ready for both situations if we have not considered and trained them for both situations.

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Katrina image: [www.katrinahelp.com](http://www.katrinahelp.com) (accessed: 06/12/09)

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