

Report from the seminar:

Command, control and coordination in international relief operations

Introduction

The seminar *Command, Control and Coordination in International Relief Operations* was part of a series of seminars at the exercise Bogorodsk 02 held in Noginsk, Russia, in September 2002. The seminar was chaired by Mr. Lars Hedström (Deputy Director-General, Swedish Rescue Services Agency). The speakers were Mr Toby Lanzer (Head of Office, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Russian Federation), Mr. Gary Littlechild (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Liaison officer to NATO and EU) and Mr. Ola Almgren (Deputy chief fire officer/ Head of Operations, Stockholm municipal fire brigade, previously with UN OCHA in Geneva as a relief coordination officer Head of FCSU and the UNDAC system).

The aim of this report is to summarize and put forward the most interesting topics from the seminar and to give some recommendations for future work within the field of command, control and coordination in international relief operations, based on the lectures and the discussion held during the seminar.

Different tasks – similar problems

When discussing the topic ‘international relief operations’ it is worth noting the wide range of operations that exist today, which in turn are expected as a response to an equally broad range of disasters. There are sudden onset disasters, for example natural and technological disasters. And there are protracted disasters, such as environmental and man-made disasters. In order to address all these different types effectively a broad range of tasks or skills are needed. But the range of tasks for command, control & coordination is not that broad, in other words the speakers argued that “C3 problems” seldom vary regardless of the type of disaster faced.

Examples of problems faced when coordinating and setting up command and control in international relief operations can be related to authority (i.e. Who is in charge?); to obtaining correct information (i.e. What has happened, is happening, and what might happen tomorrow or in the near future?); to obtain a correct understanding of the needs in the stricken country, and what response is given, and by whom, is also something that often presents problems. Before and during an operation is carried out there is a need for analysis of the situation, and this can also pose a problem that has to be handled (i.e. standards vary from country to country, from institution to institution, and from professional to professional; and in addition political considerations can taint the analysis.) Based on the analysis a strategy ought to be set. Then questions concerning who is defining the strategy, assigning roles and responsibilities have to be solved. In all operations logistics play an important role. In order for the logistics to function efficiently there have to be agreed sets of procedures and a joint logistics centre in place, in addition communications equipment and frequencies have to be shared. Cultural differences can also pose a problem to the command, control and coordination of an operation. Not only will personnel be from different countries and speaking different languages, but they also come from different institutions, with different missions, goals, and perhaps political views. Of course there are also problems to be faced concerning resources for the mission (i.e. who has them? Who controls their allocation?, Can a host authority control international resources?, How can we mobilize more?)

Command & Control

A fact that is very profound when addressing the issue of command and control in international relief operations is that as long as there is a functioning government in a stricken country then that is in charge, and is the one authority that the international teams and personnel have to relate to. Problems arise when there is no authority or when there is conflict with the authority.

If the operation is to be carried out in an area where there is no government authority one can come to terms with the command problem by asking what should be done, or achieved. And from that point of departure decide who should be in command.

The term command & control is somewhat difficult to use in the field of international relief operations. That is because “command & control” very much reflects a top-down perspective and a military approach. The humanitarian-civilian approach is built on a “bottom-up” perspective, which is more consensus-cooperational to its nature.

Coordination & Cooperation

As stated before the range of crises to be dealt with is becoming more complex, that is also true for the responders’ community. The number of both GOs and NGOs is continuously increasing. Therefore, there is a great need for coordination and cooperation.

Coordination is tricky from the point of view that “Everyone wants to coordinate, nobody wants to be coordinated”. But there are good tools for coordination today (such as OSOC, UNHOC, CMOC and CIMIC) but the international responders need to accept, and plan for the fact that they might not always be there.

Cooperation between civilian and military authorities is of special interest. This has its basis in part in the fact that every military operation has a humanitarian consequence. Civil-military cooperation has the objective to facilitate the different coordination arrangements needed in responses where both civilian and military authorities take part. These arrangements can be related to the fact that both authorities need to use the same resources (for example commercial transport), information exchange, and joint development of contingency plans. Civil-military cooperation can also be related to the need for military support to humanitarian tasks (such as protection of warehouses and key facilities and escorts for convoys).

Models for command and control in international relief operations

When creating a model for command & control in international relief operations one has to have as a starting point the questions, *what do we want to achieve?* And *who is in charge?* When answering the question a shared doctrine is created. Today there is agreement concerning the needs for a shared understanding of requirements, joint efforts in planning, a shared system for management, shared evaluation and evolution.

The model presented at the seminar identified five components of command (normative, strategic, operational, coordination of units, and command of individual units). The aim of the model is to give a unity of command or a unity of direction. The model provides a platform or a common language regardless of the different systems for command and control at the operational level.

The command and coordination of units is not the big problem. The problems that arise, and can be solved with a shared model for command, are at the operational and strategic levels. Strategic and operative command have to be separated during operations in major emergencies. One of the benefits of identifying the different levels of command is that it clarifies the fact that different levels working on different time scales are needed in order to handle a complex and dynamic situation. The inter-relationship between the components is also clarified by using a model.

One objection that was raised is that since different perspectives on management or command can be applied on differently to different communities it can be difficult to use one model.

Lessons to be learned from operations

It is important to stress that there are lessons to be learned or to be identified from operations, not lessons learned. Collaboration has been the key to success in various operations, for example in Angola 1993-1996. The promotion of collaboration between UN agencies and NGOs was specifically pointed out.

Another key to success is to focus on support to key, national constituencies when establishing humanitarian coordination. This is not only important in the first response phase but also in the long term because aid is addictive.

To make an operation successful there needs to be clarity as to the obligations of humanitarian actors, vis-à-vis, the political and military actors, and vice-versa.

Command, control and coordination in exercises

The key to improving exercises from a command, control and coordination perspective is to use and build on the results from executed exercises, for example in the development of scenarios for coming exercises. Another way of developing exercises is to work in closer cooperation with, and thereby involve, other communities in coming exercises.

There is also a need to think about the full cycle of the crisis in the planning of exercises, in order to improve the whole range of command & control levels and issues. It is not only the “CNN phase” that should be exercised; for example, long-term exit-strategies or the managing of information should be trained for.

Conclusions and general recommendations

There is a need to broaden thinking and approaches to emergency responses since humanitarian issues are just a small part of emergencies, especially when talking about terrorist actions. Therefore, it is also vital to broaden participation in exercises etc.

- The issue of command and control in international relief operations should be seen as an attitude issue, i.e. the issue should be dealt with from the perspective of what achievements the operations should lead to, and how to get there.

- It is dangerous to get stuck in a terminology discussion, but a constructive discussion is needed regarding the terms used, what they mean, what they apply to, and how they are used. Discussion is vital to enable the creation of a functioning network and to explain and overcome the differences between the civilian and military authorities.
- Personal relationships are important to ensure that coordination and cooperation function during international relief operations. As one lecturer stated “Institutions don’t do business with institutions, individuals do business with individuals”, and the world’s response community isn’t so big that the responders can’t get to know each other. Therefore, it is important for representatives, especially when it comes to cooperation between civilians and military personnel, to meet and exchange information at an earlier stage than is the case today. This can be facilitated through liaison officers.
- Cooperation between civilian and military authorities is crucial for the success of operations in complex situations. The authorities should meet earlier than is often the case. This can be achieved through liaison officers who can share information between the authorities.
- There are generic models for command & control. Models should be used not as a command structure, but as an aid to understanding each other’s systems and to using the same language, so that the right individuals can talk to each other. A model can also help to separate or divide the decision-making. The model can be used as a key to open the door for cooperation between the fire/rescue services, the emergency medical service, the police, and the military by making it clear where in the system different components or individuals belong.
- Coordination of international relief operations should emphasise collaboration rather than control – “command and control” does not work where there is a wide range of actors.
- Exercises have to become more dynamic and flexible to their structure in the future than is the case today in order to train command and control functions in a fruitful manner. If the types of exercises carried out are limited to field exercises many aspects of command & control will be lost, therefore table-top exercises could be useful.
- In order to ensure that the lessons to be learned from exercises will be used, a mechanism is needed to facilitate information exchanges between national bodies and international organisations. For the development of exercises from a command and control perspective it is also important to have a mechanism that handles the after-action reports, and that establishes an intermediate action plan to correct and improve the lessons identified.

The work of carrying out and improving international relief operations never ends. Disasters and crises continue to occur and expectations of the responder’s community increase. Resources will also increase in the foreseeable future. The only way to handle and hopefully improve responses to the increased number of crises, and actors in the operations, is to continue holding exercises and broadening participation.