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**2004 Tsunami Disaster – Consequences for Regional Cooperation**

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*Opinions expressed in this paper are personal.*

The tsunami of 26 December 2004, triggered off by the earthquake off the West coast of Sumatra Island, was a disaster unprecedented in its kind and scale in our recorded history. Causing extensive damage to life, property and environment on the Southern coast of India, including the States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh and the Union Territory of Pondicherry, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, it affected a population of 2.8 million in 1089 villages of these provinces. Loss of life as a result was estimated at 10,273 and 5,823 persons are still unaccounted. An assessment of its consequences made in February 2005 of peninsular India alone estimates the damage to be about \$574.5 million, losses at \$448.3 million and rehabilitation and reconstruction needs over the short and medium term at \$1.213 billion. There was even more intense damage and losses in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where all 13 of the Nicobar group and 2 islands of the Andaman group were badly affected, 7 of whom had to be fully evacuated.

The Indian disaster management and response system reacted to the tsunami expeditiously and vigorously initiating measures within hours. The National Crisis Management Group headed by the Cabinet Secretary (the senior-most civil servant) that included Secretaries of all relevant Ministries was activated within two hours of the tsunami striking the Indian coast and held daily meetings thereafter. The Group received continuous updates of the ground situation from the crisis centre of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the operations centre of the Integrated Defence Staff. The Ministry of Home Affairs, in turn, was fed by provincial control rooms processing real time information from the district level where the affected sites were being evaluated round the clock. For its part, the Integrated Defence Staff Ops Room was monitoring and coordinating the activities of the defence services in search, rescue, evacuation and relief operations, playing a particularly vital role in contacting the Andaman and Nicobar Islands where the communications infrastructure was devastated. The Indian Cabinet met on 27 December to review the situation and constituted a special Group of Ministers under the Prime Minister himself, that too met on a daily basis. The Prime Minister, Defence Minister, Home Minister and other Union Ministers visited affected areas to ensure that relief operations were effectively underway. An Integrated Relief Command was set up especially for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands considering the severity of the damage and the complications of providing relief.

Activities initiated on 26 December 2004 convey the speed of the Indian system's responsive capability. Affected States and Union Territories were all contacted by the Central

(federal) Government at their capitals, districts and local level to ascertain the ground situation. The decision was made to use the armed forces in addition to the local administration for relief operations. Their deployment began in a matter of hours and naval ships began to put out to sea. The Kalpakkam Atomic Power Plant on the Tamil Nadu coast, a major concern, was secured. Federal para-military personnel were airlifted to Tamil Nadu as additional resources for search, rescue and evacuation. Relief teams were despatched by the Home Ministry to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Relief hubs in various parts of the country were also identified and designated to begin collection of supply materials. Immediate concerns were of rescue of marooned and stranded persons, evacuation of population in danger, providing temporary shelter to relief camps, disposal of dead bodies, provision of food, water and medicine, evaluating the damage caused to the infrastructure (particularly power, water and communications) and ensuring the safety of the tribal population in Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Statistics of the rescue and evacuation efforts – 28,734 persons rescued, 646,000 persons moved to safer places and 64 special flights operated by civil aviation in addition to military flights – convey to an extent the magnitude of the challenge. The federal government alone deployed 21,000 military and para-military personnel for immediate search and rescue missions, in addition to forces locally available in the provinces. In all, 881 relief camps were set up that housed 604, 335 affected people in various States. Logistical aspects were particularly formidable as the devastation in affected areas was so complete that even basic needs had to be catered to from outside. This included foodstuff, food packets for immediate consumption, drinking water, halogen tablets, clothing, medicines, small and large tents, torches, cooking utensils, generators and pump sets, Bailey bridges and desalination plants. Delivery of relief resources picked up very sharply, from 192 MT on 31 December to 1009 MT on 3 January and peaking at 7257 MT on 13 January, 2005. The complexity of this effort is put in perspective when distances involved are taken into account. The peninsular coast of India itself had an affected length of almost 2500 kilometres. The worst hit region – the Andaman and Nicobar Islands – was closer to Indonesia than to the Indian mainland and the four supply points to its capital, Port Blair, were Chennai (1363 kms. away), Vizag (1220 kms.), Kochi (2250 kms) and Kolkata (1300 kms). From these distances, the urgent needs of these islands - a total tonnage of 4900 MT in the first two weeks - was supplied by aircraft and by ships. Local distribution had its own complications as many jetties and landing points had been destroyed by the tsunami, requiring supplies to be transferred to landing craft and smaller boats that alone could beach in these circumstances. Medical and health challenges were equally daunting, requiring more than 1150 civil medical teams to be deployed on the mainland, assisted by 20 military medical teams. The armed forces spearheaded medical relief at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands with a naval ship (INS Magar) providing an offshore hospital. Emergency medicines distributed within the first few days alone were in excess of Rs.30 million.

The Indian military's role in the tsunami relief operations, both in India and in neighbouring countries, deserves special mention. Its concept of operations were built around the following elements: (a) assess what is required and prioritise, (b) rescue and relocate (c) essentials of life receive primacy, (d) the capability to deliver has to match the capacity to accept (e) move things to a central point where facilities develop for onward delivery to smaller nodes, (f) harmonise long term strategy of restarting routine with emergency relief (g) ensure synergy with other agencies (h) flexibility between air dropping and landing (i) use helicopters and

smaller crafts in tandem with transport aircraft and ships (j) urgency dictates means, and (k) set the stage for reconstruction and rehabilitation. In the first phase of operations, focus was on reconnaissance, rescue and relocation and providing immediate succour and emergency treatment. The second phase was aimed at relief and consolidation, the third at helping reconstruction and rehabilitation and the fourth was in support of restoration of normalcy. Operation Madad encompassed all relief operations on the East coast of India and resources brought to bear included 8300 Army troops, 5500 Navy personnel, 3000 Air Force personnel and 2000 members of the Coast Guard. 40 ships, 34 aircraft and 42 helicopters were deployed in this effort. In addition to relief and medical assistance, the armed forces also undertook diving, salvage and debris clearance operations on a very extensive scale.

Even as this massive internal rescue and relief effort was initiated, the Indian Government felt that it must immediately respond to needs of neighbouring countries. While India had adequate capabilities to cope with requirements within its own territory, it was apparent even from preliminary reports that devastation in Sri Lanka, Maldives and Indonesia was extensive and required international relief. The spirit of regional cooperation mandated that external assistance was better directed at those who were in greater need. The same approach guided India's own participation in regional relief efforts that took the form of Operation Rainbow in Sri Lanka, Operation Castor in Maldives and Operation Gambhir in Indonesia.

In Sri Lanka, Indian ships and aircraft were the first to arrive, with doctors and medical supplies airlifted by 26 December 2004 itself. The deployment included 10 ships, an air detachment of 10 aircraft for three weeks, 15 medical teams, a mobile field hospital that was airlifted, specialist doctors, a 45 bed hospital ship, 10 teams of naval divers and a 81 member composite Army team. 7 medical camps and 2 relief camps were established in different regions of Sri Lanka, extensive salvage and debris clearance were undertaken at Galle and Trincomalee harbours (Galle was reopened on 4 January 2005), and survey and repair of water/power supply and restoration of telecommunications carried out by the Army team. Other relevant activities included installation of Bailey bridges, undertaking satellite photography of affected areas, supply of medicines and provision of psychiatrists. The relief package announced by India for Sri Lanka was Rs.1 billion.

In Maldives, under Operation Castor, the Indian military undertook the challenge of providing provisions, water and essential medical supplies to the islands, 6 of which were totally inundated, 78 that suffered moderate damage, 37 that were without power and water and 13 that had to be evacuated. 30 tonnes of relief supplies were immediately provided by Indian ships in addition to material flown by 4 Indian aircraft from the mainland. 160 tonnes of supplies were also moved out of the capital Male to outlying islands by ship. Search and rescue operations, air dropping of food and water, providing medical and relief stores, conducting damage assessment and restoring power supply and communications on 9 islands were among the tasks carried out. 3 Indian ships (INS Mysore, INS Udaygiri and CGS Samar) were stationed in the Maldives as part of the operations and Indian Naval personnel assisted their Maldives counterpart in establishing a maritime coordination centre. India provided a relief package of Rs.50 million to Maldives.

In Indonesia, the hospital ship INS Nirupak and a corvette INS Khukri were deployed off Meulaboh on the coast of western Aceh that was completely devastated by the tsunami. They arrived on 5 January and disembarked and distributed 50 tonnes of emergency relief supplies. Medical teams from INS Nirupak treated victims both on board and at an off shore camp for three weeks. India offered \$1 million of emergency relief supplies initially and a further \$2 million after the March 2005 earthquake.

The international response to the tsunami was coordinated by the Core Group that was established following initial discussions between the foreign ministers of United States and India. Comprising at first of the US, India, Japan and Australia, it was expanded to include the U.N., Canada and the Netherlands. From its very inception, the Core Group was envisaged as an urgent and ad-hoc response to an unprecedented situation that required close and continuous coordination between those contributing actively and expeditiously to rescue and relief. It took the form of daily teleconferencing between designated officials of the participating countries, the Foreign Secretary in the case of India. Each participant provided a daily briefing of their national effort and, in turn, received similar accounts from others. This coordination was extremely useful and effective, as it allowed sharing of information and avoidance of duplication so integral to optimising an international relief effort. In many cases, one party had assets and capabilities that addressed the needs of another, thereby obviating a situation where additional resources would have to be summoned with loss of time. Gaps were filled and back-ups provided on a timely basis as a result. From the Indian perspective, coordination between India and the United States in rescue and relief operations in Sri Lanka was of particular note. Coordination of the international response also called for unique procedures and mechanisms. For example, the Indian Government approved special procedures for granting overflight rights and landing clearances of military aircraft of Core Group countries during this period. Similarly, two Indian MPAT trained officers were despatched to Utapao in Thailand for coordination with the US command post there and a liaison officer deployed with PACOM in Hawaii.

International and regional cooperative efforts are now focused on post-tsunami reconstruction and rehabilitation, among them housing, rural and municipal infrastructure, transportation, communications and coastal protection. Damaged assets not only need replacement but upgrading as well to overcome their earlier vulnerability. A cross-cutting approach that goes beyond livelihood restoration is being advocated with risk management that is preventive and less dependent on relief and assistance. The World Bank, ADB, IFAD and UNDP are among institutions contributing to reconstruction in India. Establishing a tsunami early warning system is perceived as a key priority and its components envisaged in India include strengthening the existing seismological network, establishing bottom pressure recorders around tsunami-genic zones, setting up a chain of sea level monitoring stations, undertaking modelling and mapping exercises and expanding capacity building and training to respond. With 2007 as target, this will enable India to contribute to the regional tsunami warning system and other relevant international mechanisms.

The experience of responding to the tsunami disaster, including undertaking of simultaneous domestic and regional relief efforts, reflects changes in Indian capabilities and attitudes over the last decade. The relative swiftness and decisive nature of the response reflected lessons learnt from previous experience including the Gujarat earthquake. A multi-level

disaster management structure right down to the local administration was central to the assessment process and the carrying out of directives. Federal, state and local governments meshed well in the exercise, as did the military with civil administration. Assets to deal with situations have expanded, skills have grown with experience, as apparently have coordination abilities. Public support for the relief effort was also unprecedented. The very willingness to engage in extensive commitments outside India while meeting formidable challenges at home speaks of a new sense of confidence. The emergence of the Core Group during the initial response was interesting as much for its spontaneity as for its operational implications. All the parties concerned had a sense of shared purpose and understood their obligation in face of such a calamity to render full assistance. The very creation of the Core Group and its subsequent smooth functioning revealed levels of comfort that its participants have today between themselves and towards countries where they directed their assistance. It is difficult to imagine that the complicated politico-military coordination that underpinned this effort would have been possible without the military-to-military relations that had preceded it. Exercises, port calls, policy level interaction and training and intelligence exchanges that today characterise the defence relationship between India and United States have created a framework where it is possible to work together at short notices. Our forces, their planners and the systems as a whole know each much better. The Core Group provides us a template with which other shared challenges and common concerns could be addressed. While natural disasters are the most obvious example, our concerns on global threats like international terrorism and WMD proliferation also call for broader and multi-national response. So too do reconstruction of societies in post-conflict situations. Whether it is challenges like strengthening democratic capacities or meeting health mega-concerns like HIV/AIDS or SARS, the case for burden-sharing is strong. Cooperative management is as much a necessity for security and disaster response as it is for environmental challenges or economic ones. It is obviously easier to undertake when the participants share values, ideals, traditions and practices. The real lesson from the experience is not merely that we discovered that we could work together but that, by doing so, the extent we could multiply our efforts and optimise our delivery.

At a regional level, India's reaching out to Sri Lanka, Maldives and Indonesia at a time of need demonstrates that the opening of its economy 15 years ago has opened it as a society as well. Linkages within the region are being strengthened by high economic growth, cross-investments and trade, greater intra-regional tourism and more effective communications. People in India identified as much with Galle, Male or Aceh as with Nagapattanam or Nicobar when they saw images in television. When prosperity and disaster are both perceived as indivisible, a new order may well be in the making.