

Role of Pakistan's Armed Forces in 2010 Floods

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When we assumed the Soldier, we did not lay aside the Citizen.

George Washington

When nature laid its wrath on Pakistan in July 2010, engulfing major parts of the country with devastating floods, it demanded that the nation stand tall. This led to emergence of the Pakistani army as the dominant national player in rescue missions. The army's role gave clear evidence of careful planning, optimal utilisation of resources, sharp foresight, and bold leadership. The army conducted and participated in numerous life-saving operations, and reinvented itself during one of the toughest times faced by this war-struck country. It involved itself in every aspect of the job, and rendered full support in terms of resources and rescue efforts. It helped in controlling the damage to a large extent thereby saving not only lives, but also the means of livelihood. In some ways, these events led to a shift in the previously held negative international opinion of the Pakistani armed forces.

This achievement of the Pakistani army is narrated as a case study that describes and compares the role of armed forces in disaster management and nation-building activities, across the globe. The importance of cooperation between civil administration and military is also discussed, especially with regard to such events where all the national organisations of a country need to work together to bring back peace and stability in the internal environment. Natural calamities can strike any continent or country at any point of time. The events of July 2010 in Pakistan only reinforce the importance and need for us to get our act together and use this experience to create an efficient framework to ensure effective disaster management.

Introduction

“Disaster management can be defined as the organisation and management of resources and responsibilities for dealing with all humanitarian aspects of emergencies, in particular preparedness, response and recovery in order to lessen the impact of disasters”¹.

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Disasters have become a common phenomenon raising global concerns. Climate and environmental change are together considered to be a major cause of this alarming situation. Disasters can either be environmental or man-made in nature. Environmental disasters or natural disasters are a result of natural phenomena and drastic changes in weather patterns whereas man-made disasters occur due to excessive human intervention and activities, which constantly damage the natural environment causing shifts in its regular patterns.

The results of such events are destructive not only for human life but also for the economy and growth of the affected country and its surrounding areas. Nevertheless, once the loss has occurred, a country needs to make efforts towards mitigating the impact of disasters, i.e., disaster management and, hence, the response to such a situation becomes an integral part of the post-crisis scenario. The response has to be very swift and aimed towards reconstruction in order to restore the livelihood, economy, and infrastructure of the affected area/country. With the increasing frequency of disasters, the role of government and of the civil society has become critical in rescue and recovery activities. The armed forces and civil society have to work in tandem with each other in order to prevent the aggravation of the existing problems, rendered in by the chaotic civil order situation in a disaster-struck country. But there are several areas that are beyond the reach of civil society and other organs of civil administration. Here, the role of the armed forces and paramilitary is considered to be vital as, since time immemorial, these have been playing an active part in rescue and relief operations. "They are well trained to react in emergencies and are the biggest succor-providing organisations, capable of moving swiftly to any part of the country, in the shortest possible time."²

To further understand and expand the concept of disaster management, the views of Cleo Paskal are helpful:

To maintain stability in a crisis, one needs to segregate the challenges faced by a country in a more coherent way to estimate its vulnerabilities. The three components of a Disaster management program are as follows: *Reinforce*, *Rescue* and *Recovery*. *Reinforce* stands for preventive measures where the countries take adequate measures to be able to prevent or cope up in case of a natural disaster. *Rescue* deals with the provision of assistance to the victimized in the most efficient manner, and lastly *Recovery* implies the measures taken during the time of crisis in order to stabilize the situation in a given time. These functions have to be performed by the government, society, the private sector and the media to fight natural disasters even in the most adverse situation, to be able to help the needy and restructure the functioning of the government and society most efficiently.³

Every disaster has several consequences, which are not only economic or political but also societal. These involve providing food, shelter, clothing, and medical assistance to internally displaced people. For such a system to work effectively, there is a need for stable governance mechanisms, economic stability, and a peaceful society.

When a state like Pakistan, which is on the verge of being declared as a failed state by the international community; which is known to provide a safe haven for terrorists; limited resources to support its economy independently; and with largely damaged civilian-military relations limiting the scope for cooperation, is hit by such a disaster, its successful efforts for mitigating this situation deserve some level of attention. The aim of this paper is to highlight how Pakistan's armed forces were efficiently and effectively able to meet the needs of the people and the state during the 2010 floods, and what this means in terms of its impact on the opinions of the international community.

Case Study: Pakistan's 2010 Floods

The Indian subcontinent is susceptible to a variety of disasters due to its unique topography and climatic characteristics. One such disaster were the major floods in Pakistan in 2010. This was considered to be the worst flood since 1929, which also caused large scale devastation and displacement. "Flooding began on July 22, 2010, in the province of Baluchistan. The swollen waters then poured across the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province in the northwest before flowing south into Punjab and Sindh. Estimates of the death toll of the floods range from 1,300 to 1,600."⁴ The flooding occurred after the onset of the monsoon, and caused severe damage to national property and infrastructure. In some cases, the flooding had wiped out entire villages beyond reconstruction. Depending on topography, land use, population density, and other factors, the primary effects of the floods and their implications in terms of the nature, severity, and expected duration of damage varied.⁵ The floods were followed by widespread fear of various water-borne diseases such as cholera and diarrhoea due to accumulation of rainwater in the affected areas.

While some believed that the flooding was caused by changing patterns of climate, others observed that it was due to heavy human activities causing severe pressure on the earth's resources. Many of these activities are producing effects comparable to the natural forces that influence the climate. Changes in land use through activities such as deforestation, the building of cities, the storage and use of water, and the use of energy are all important factors.⁶ Various climatologists believe that the 2010 floods were driven by a 'supercharged jet-stream' that has also caused floods in China and prolonged heat waves in Russia.⁷ The severity of rainfall was

extremely high owing to high temperatures that prevailed during this period. Almost 14 million people were affected by the torrential rains in Pakistan.

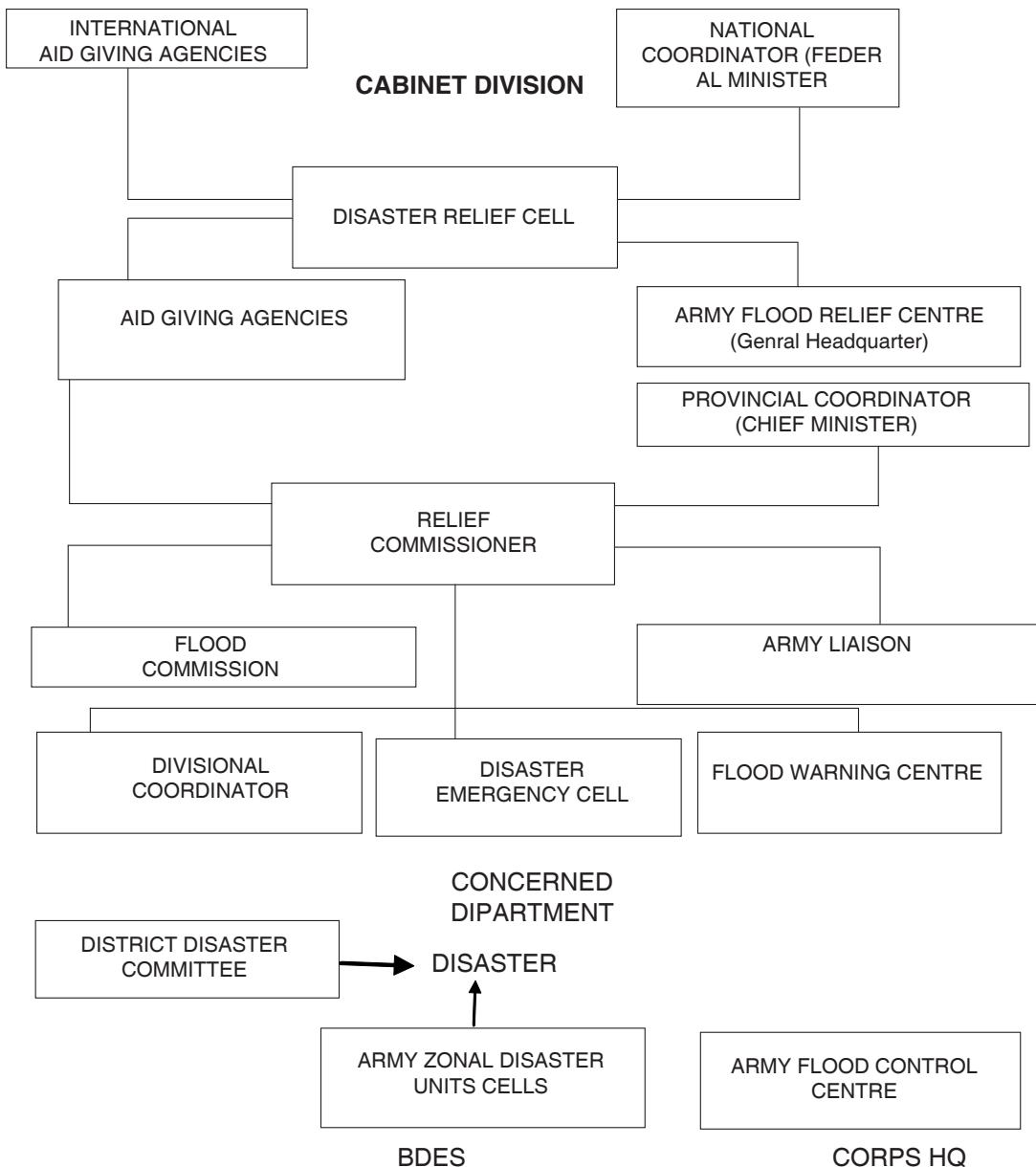
"The current flooding in Pakistan is mainly due to climate change (Report, 9 August). It is the unusual climate-change-led seasonal cycle of land temperature in Pakistan that has exacerbated the monsoon rainfall and produced the hugest volume of water in the northern mountainous region of the country ever recorded in the history, causing floods in the Indus river basin."⁸"According to the UN, the current floods in Pakistan are the greatest humanitarian crisis in recent history, with more people affected than the Southeast Asian tsunami and earthquakes in Kashmir and Haiti"⁹ combined.

The Pakistan army is considered to be the centre of power in the country and it holds extensive decision-making powers. The country's forces play an active role in times of crisis. Even in the past, they have done a splendid work in restoring the situation in case of disasters such as "the great floods of 1992, the floods in Balochistan in 2008 and the October 2005 devastating Kashmir earthquake; army engineers, medical and logistics personnel, and the armed forces played a major role in bringing relief and supplies."¹⁰

Over the period, the army has developed a comprehensive organizational setup to fight challenges resulting from disasters, such as floods, in the country. Hence, they developed an operative structure called "The National Disaster Organisation". This organisation functions at both Federal and Provincial Levels. Under this structure, first comes the Army Flood Protection and Relief Protection, which comprises of General Head Quarters Flood Relief Centre, the Corps Flood Control Centres, and Liaison with Provincial Governments.¹¹ These are followed by a series of procedures such as Conduct flood relief Operation; functioning of Flood Relief Center; Flood relief equipment, etc.

Figure 1 shows the National Disaster Operative Structure of Pakistan.

Figure 1: Pakistan's National Disaster Operative Structure



Source: www.pakistanarmy.gov.pk.

The Pakistan army, supported by the National Disaster Organization, played a crucial role during the monsoon floods of July 2010. According to several media reports, the Pakistan army deployed over 40,000–60,000 troops and roughly 300 plus helicopters in the wake of the floods. Several military doctors were sent to affected areas to treat the victims. “The entire fleet of army aviation flew numerous sorties round-the-clock to transport relief goods to the affected areas and to bring the sick and injured back to base hospitals. Where helicopters were unable to access, troops carried relief goods on their backs and were able to reach those in need.”¹²

The army collected rations from their own quota to distribute to the affected people, and also donated one day’s salary for the relief fund. Helicopters were instrumental in providing relief supplies, and several army relief camps were set up to help people who had lost their homes and livelihood in the floods. Several sources indicate that the army had rescued over 800,000 people during these operations.¹³ The affected populations received 1.5 million packets of cooked food.¹⁴ All available C-130 planes were dedicated for relief operations along with 1,000 boats and 50 life-saving boats.¹⁵ The armed forces displayed intense dedication and went to all the affected areas to provide assistance of every possible kind.

The floods also deepened the political crisis in Pakistan by highlighting the divisions within the ruling elite, and raised the prospect of a possible return to military dictatorship in the face of popular anger over the handling of the floods.¹⁶ The role played by the military bolstered their image within as well as outside the country as, on one hand, the civilian government failed to provide much assistance and, on the other, the Pakistani army was out there in the affected areas providing rescue and relief to the people. Similar to the experience during the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, the single primary actor on the ground in the immediate wake of the 2010 floods was the Pakistani military.¹⁷ The people vented their frustration against the government by throwing stones at their convoys. Nisar Ahmed, a victim of the floods said, “Of course, it is the army helping the people. The government never helps at a bad time. We only see politicians when they come here to ask for votes, but then they disappear.”¹⁸ With the victims losing everything in the floods, and facing hunger and poor health conditions, the government was unable to take charge of the situation when the people were looking for support. The civilian government had failed to fulfill its duties. On the other hand, “by demonstrating its power and reach as the only national institution with the organisational skills, manpower and resources to provide flood relief, [the Pakistani military] has served notice to the country’s squabbling politicians. If it were ever to decide to take over at some point in the future, it probably has the means, and the power, to do so.”¹⁹

The Pakistan military was involved in the reconstruction of infrastructure as well. As part of the relief effort, they managed to collect funds in Army Relief Package

through various means. Out of these, Rs 662 million were spent on reconstruction which was done in two phases, while Rs 380 million were spent on various relief programmes in flood affected areas.²⁰ The relief fund was also used to reconstruct religious institutions, medical facilities, educational centres, etc. The military not only managed to rescue people but also gave them a sense of security by giving them the necessary infrastructure such as shelter. Due to the extraordinary role played by the military there were no second waves of incidents caused by the floods—there were no food shortages, the mortality rate did not go up, and adequate resources were provided to people to enable their return to normalcy.

Even in the 2011 floods, the Pakistan armed forces were recognised for having played an unrelenting role in relief operations. They established relief camps and medical camps in the close vicinity of the affected areas in Sanghar, Mir Pur Khas, Umer Kot, and Badin. To provide safe drinking water in the flood affected areas, they set up 10 water filtration plants. Army doctors treated more than 45,000 patients in medical camps and mobile medical units in all flood affected districts²¹ for providing instant medical assistance. The Pakistan navy was instrumental in providing rations and drinkable water. The armed forces also made efforts to pump out the flood waters from the affected areas. The United Nations has also recommended that the Pakistan army be part of a standby force for global relief and rescue operations.

Conclusion

The people affected by the 2010 floods are still trying to rebuild their lives. In the areas where the floods hit the hardest—Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab—95 per cent of victims were able to return home by early November. However, during that same time period, 85 per cent of the affected population in Sindh province remained unable to return to what remained of their homes.²² The post-flood impact could have been lessened if the civilian government and the armed forces had worked in tandem with each other. The 2010 floods and the past events of disasters either natural or man-made have redefined the Pakistan's armed forces role in the country and world-wide. The infamous military coup by Pervez Musharraf after the 1999 Kargil War was one of the major turning points, as far as the negative image of the Pakistan armed forces is concerned. The declining reputation of the armed forces in the country was, however, improved by the impeccable efforts of the forces in disaster relief and management. With 20 million Pakistanis affected by the floods and in the face of inadequate response on the part of the government, the army has been able to boost its image by coordinating relief efforts and delivering supplies.²³

According to Cleo Paskal's framework, as given above, all social elements and institutions are accountable to the people of the country. Even if one cog in

the machine fails to function well in such a scenario, the impact of the disaster becomes more severe. For example, Hurricane Katrina which hit New Orleans in the United States in 2005, was considered to be one of worst disasters faced by the US and also one of the costliest. The situation worsened due to poor disaster management as there was chaos and disorder in society, and delay in the response of the governmental authorities. There was a lack of funds, command and control in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the National Guard was unable to control the growing civil unrest and render humanitarian relief. As a newspaper later stated: "A congressional report... slams the government's response to Hurricane Katrina, calling it a 'failure of leadership' that left people stranded when they were most in need."²⁴

The 2011 floods in Pakistan's southern province of Sindh also occurred during the mid-August monsoon season. Their impact was considered to be much greater than that of the 2010 floods since the country had not fully recovered from the previous year's disaster and its resultant damages. However, even during this calamity, the army played an important role in helping the people. Every country has its limitations and so does Pakistan; however, with local and international support and aid/relief operations, they were able to stabilise the situation with the army at the helm.



Notes:

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