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Disasters Without Borders: Strengthening BIMSTEC Cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance

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ABSTRACT This brief seeks to understand the importance of Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR) initiatives in the Bay of Bengal undertaken by the BIMSTEC countries individually, and the dynamics of their collaboration as a subregional forum. It opens with an analysis of the turbulent nature of the Bay of Bengal, because of which disaster management gains paramount importance for the littoral states. The aim is to understand the BIMSTEC countries' individual HADR mechanisms, their varied approaches to the principles of HADR, and the avenues for cooperation they have explored in the recent past. The brief then examines the potential for greater collaboration amongst the BIMSTEC countries in the context of HADR, and offers recommendations to strengthen these efforts.

INTRODUCTION

The Bay of Bengal bridges the two regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is one of the world's most turbulent water bodies; often-violent cyclones frequently develop in the bay, causing disasters in the surrounding areas. Therefore, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) mechanisms are highly important.

Natural calamities strike nations without discrimination based on political borders and thus foster bonds of unity amongst those that are affected. As a natural corollary, HADR has become one of the core areas of cooperation for the Bay of Bengal littoral states, which together form the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

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All the member states—India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan—are equipped with varying degrees of military and civilian HADR capabilities. India, with the largest HADR force amongst the Bay littoral states, leads the BIMSTEC in the areas of environment and disaster management.

Against this backdrop, this brief undertakes an analysis of the HADR efforts of the BIMSTEC members individually, and their potential to make BIMSTEC a functional subregional organisation through mutual cooperation in times of natural crisis. It emphasises on the role of India as a major stakeholder in the context of 10 recent HADR operations conducted in the Bay of Bengal.

BAY LITTORALS AND HADR MECHANISMS

The 1994 Oslo guidelines on “The Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief” state that “humanitarian assistance must be provided with the core principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality and must also fully respect the sovereignty of states.”¹ Western and Asian countries differ in their approaches to providing aid during HADR operations. For Western nations, providing or receiving relief in the aftermath of a humanitarian crisis does not pose threat to their national sovereignty, as they are economically strong, to begin with. Asian countries like India, meanwhile, are more cautious and protective about their sovereignty and may be reluctant in engaging in such HADR operations where there exists a possibility of violating their own or another country’s sovereignty.²

South Asian Members

India

India has the longest coastline, and several small islands, in the Bay of Bengal. These islands are

extremely prone to natural disasters originating in the Bay. India’s HADR conforms to the “typically Asian view” being “apolitical”, “decentralised”, and most often taking a “government-to-government approach.”³ Only on one occasion did India extend aid in a post-conflict scenario, i.e., in 2008-2009 in Sri Lanka, when regional stability and ensuring harmony in the region gained precedence over its own Non-Aligned principles.⁴

In 2005 the Disaster Management Act was adopted by the Indian government, leading to the formation of two bodies—the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), equipped to train people to handle disasters; and the National Disaster Management Authority, headed by the prime minister and the State Disaster Management Authorities under the respective chief ministers—to spearhead and implement a holistic and integrated approach to Disaster Management in India.”⁵

India, through its HADR activities, seeks to establish harmonious ties with its neighbours and conceives the idea of rendering assistance as “extending sympathy” to the disaster-affected regions or as a “goodwill gesture.”⁶ For India’s policymakers, “building capabilities, interoperability and a conceptual framework for participation in these operations is gaining increasing urgency.”⁷ India is cautious in its HADR approach as it believes that the responsibility to protect should not provide a pretext for humanitarian intervention or unilateral action.⁸ During the first BIMSTEC Summit in 2004, India proposed cooperation in the area of information-sharing and remote sensing for catastrophe management. India also put forward a plan to establish the BIMSTEC Centre on Weather and Climate, which has been operational since August 2004.⁹

While both military and civilian authorities engage in India's HADR initiatives, it is the Army that is more active in disaster management operations.¹⁰ India engages in a number of joint HADR exercises, such as "Jalrahat", "Prakampana" and "Sahayata". The first was undertaken by the Indian Army, the second by the Navy, and the third, started in September 2016, was undertaken by the Air Force.¹¹ To nurture a more effective and integrated HADR apparatus, India must not only engage in technologically advancing its armed forces but also devise a methodology by which its civilian authorities and armed forces can work in harmony.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to the frequent natural calamities occurring in the Bay. Unlike India, where HADR operations are based on direct government-to-government interaction, in Bangladesh, NGOs play a significant role in disaster relief activities along with the government.

Headed by the prime minister, the National Disaster Management Council was established when Bangladesh passed the Disaster Management Act in 2012. The task of the council is to review disaster-affected areas and respond effectively with policies and directives.¹² Under the council are numerous nodal agencies. The Disaster Management and Relief Division under the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, Government of Bangladesh is responsible for coordinating national disaster management efforts across all agencies in accordance with the Standing Order on Disasters of 1997.¹³

Bangladesh's armed forces—for its command structure, trained manpower and capabilities—is always in a good position to

make the fastest response in the hour of need.¹⁴ The Ministry of Food and Disaster Management is the main government organ under which the Armed Forces Division works along with civilian authorities to address crisis situations.¹⁵

However, the problem is one of lack of coordination and resource allocation amongst the different ministry-controlled agencies. The disaster management apparatus is not very effective at the grassroots level.¹⁶ Moreover, the resources and funds are spent more on disaster response than on disaster preparedness. Therefore, the National Plan for Disaster Management was framed to bring a paradigm shift in disaster management from conventional response and relief practice to a more comprehensive risk reduction culture.¹⁷ Bangladesh must empower local communities: with their local knowledge, they can take immediate measures to lessen the consequences should disaster strike. As a BIMSTEC member, Bangladesh contributes in joint HADR operations but can be more effective if it integrates its internal HADR mechanisms.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka often suffers from the natural calamities raging over the Bay of Bengal. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Disaster Management seeks to protect human life through effective prevention and management of disasters.¹⁸ The government adopted the Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act No. 13 in 2005 and established the National Council for Disaster Management (NCDM) as the supreme body for disaster management in Sri Lanka, under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, led by the president. Unlike in other BIMSTEC countries, in Sri Lanka, some leaders of the opposition are part of the council along with some ministers from the central

government and chief ministers of every provincial council.¹⁹

It has been argued that although the NCDM is efficient and works without unnecessary delays, lack of interest of the private sector, absence of committed community participation, and the lack of political will in the execution of the National Disaster Management Framework continue to hinder effective disaster management in Sri Lanka.²⁰ As a result, Sri Lanka remains more a recipient of HADR than a donor, dependent on India for assistance in the aftermath of natural disasters, as was evident after the Tsunami of 2004.

Nepal and Bhutan

Nepal is susceptible to earthquakes, landslides and glacial lake outburst floods. It is geologically vulnerable due to difficult climatic conditions, and tectonic and geomorphic processes. Loss of life and property, therefore, is a common phenomenon.

The Nepal Centre for Disaster Management was formed in February 2002 to empower locals to handle natural disasters through training and proper awareness programmes.²¹ However, the flaws in Nepal's HADR apparatus were exposed during the 2015 earthquakes. In an uneven terrain, providing HADR proved to be difficult. The government decided that there was an urgent need to engage in proactive policies related to natural disasters, with emphasis on preparedness, rescue, relief management and rehabilitation.²²

Like Nepal, Bhutan too is prone to earthquakes and landslides. The Disaster Management Act was adopted by the Parliament of the Kingdom of Bhutan in February 2013, which established the National Disaster Management Authority comprising

the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs. This body formulated Bhutan's Disaster Management Strategic Policy Framework and approved the National Disaster Management and Contingency Plan.²³ The aim of the department is to reduce the risk of disasters and embark on disaster management initiatives to advance the goal of "gross national happiness."²⁴ A special feature of Bhutan's Department of Disaster Management in comparison to the other BIMSTEC countries is that it also undertakes poverty alleviation initiatives as a grant of relief in the aftermath of a disaster.²⁵

Bhutan's HADR apparatus is well integrated but has not made significant external contributions compared to other BIMSTEC members. However, during the massive 2015 Nepal earthquakes, Bhutan managed to provide aid and assistance in relief operations.

Southeast Asian Members

Myanmar and Thailand

The Myanmar government's focal point for Disaster Preparedness and Response is the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement.²⁶ In 2009, the Myanmar Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction was adopted, and three emergency coordination centres were set up. It proved to be the heart of Myanmar's HADR apparatus, as was witnessed during the floods of 2015. The Disaster Management Law of 2013 led to the establishment of the National Committee for Disaster Management, the highest decision-making body for disaster management chaired by the vice president.²⁷ Working committees and sub-committees are constituted depending on the emergency generated by the crisis. In 2015, the government formulated the Disaster Management Rules.²⁸ However, Myanmar's capability to respond to disasters remains inadequate.

HADR efforts come under the umbrella of the Myanmar Armed Forces. Effective coordination, information sharing, networking, monitoring, rapid assistance and deployment of forces are required between civil agencies and armed forces.²⁹ Despite having a large HADR apparatus, Myanmar requires significant amount of external assistance from its neighbouring BIMSTEC countries.

Thailand experiences its fair share of natural catastrophes that originate in the Bay. The government adopted the Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Act in 2007. The Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation under the Ministry of Interior is the core government department that handles national disaster management work.³⁰ The National Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Committee, headed by the prime minister, is responsible for making policies on disaster risk management. The Provincial Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Committee and Bangkok Metropolitan Committee are present at the state level. The “provincial plan” authorises local governments to undertake disaster management in the aftermath of the disaster.³¹

In terms of HADR engagement with the other BIMSTEC nations, the second Indo-Thailand HADR Tabletop Exercise 2017 was conducted in May 2017, between the Indian Air Force and Royal Thailand Air Force. The exercise aimed to lay down a procedure for disaster relief operations and establish a decision support system at various stages of relief operations.³²

ACROSS THE BAY: HADR COLLABORATIONS

An evaluation of the various approaches and HADR mechanisms of the BIMSTEC countries reveals that many BIMSTEC countries are underdeveloped, and therefore have inadequate

capacity to respond effectively to disasters.³³ Therefore, it is important in the Bay of Bengal subregion to study how the United Nations’ Sendai Framework³⁴ may be effective in institutionalising collaborative HADR arrangement both at the micro and macro levels.

Sendai Framework: Making HADR more effective

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015–30 propagates an institutional approach to disaster mitigation and includes seven goals: reducing global disaster mortality, lowering the number of disaster victims, minimising the loss of property and damage to infrastructure, increasing the number of nations with disaster management strategies by enhancing international cooperation, increasing the availability of early warning systems, and improving disaster risk information. This framework also provides four priority sectors for disaster risk reduction (DRR):³⁵

- Understanding the disaster risk;
- Strengthening disaster risk governance for effective management;
- Investing in DRR; and
- Facilitating better disaster preparedness for effective response and following the motto of “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

The Micro Level: Decentralisation to Strengthen Disaster Preparedness

For implementation of the Sendai Framework, effective decentralisation is a prerequisite. Especially for the BIMSTEC nations that are highly susceptible to natural hazards, there is a need to shift from disaster response to disaster

preparedness, which will significantly curtail the number of disaster casualties. To achieve this, people at the grassroots must be educated and trained about disaster management. This has been successfully implemented to an extent in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where locals are being educated as nodal agents to report any signs of impending disaster and to mobilise early evacuation operations.³⁶ It is desirable that such measures be undertaken on a subregional scale. Once implemented, the Sendai Framework will lead to decentralisation at the micro level of the BIMSTEC states.

The Macro Level: Facilitating Subregional Collaboration

To facilitate better exchange of ideas, experiences and HADR practices, and the initiation of new subregional collaborative ventures, it is important to enhance disaster prevention and preparedness in the Bay of Bengal. Keeping this in mind, the 2016 Delhi Declaration of the Asian Ministerial Conference for DRR, aimed at implementing the Sendai Framework, is an inspiration for the BIMSTEC nations to engage in better subregional HADR initiatives.³⁷

A reflection of such efforts may be found in the BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise initiated by India's NDRF in August 2017.³⁸

Learning from MILAN

The joint collaboration of MILAN, which involved most of the BIMSTEC countries, may be worth evaluating to make the BIMSTEC's own HADR operations more successful. MILAN deemed profitable the sharing of specialised HADR skills and best practices between the navies of all Bay littoral states. Thus, an "international maritime seminar," focusing on

"Maritime Cooperation for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Operations" was organised as part of MILAN 2014. Participating navies found common procedures of coordination, logistics and medical aid, all essential for joint HADR operations. MILAN has been growing from strength to strength ever since. It allows participating navies to interact on several fronts, and showcases the Andaman and Nicobar Islands' rich heritage.³⁹ After all, the enormity of managing any natural disaster calls for collective and collaborative efforts so that relief can be provided with efficiency and speed.

CONCLUSION

In March 2017, the security chiefs of the BIMSTEC members recognised Bay of Bengal as a common space for which collective strategies must be designed. They put emphasis on maritime security and on looking for avenues to strengthen maritime security cooperation and HADR operations.⁴⁰

The first preparatory BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise was organised by India's NDRF in August 2017. This exercise provides a platform to share the best practices on comprehensive aspects of DRR, and strengthen regional response and coordination for disaster management amongst the BIMSTEC members.⁴¹ The next phase of the exercise—comprising tabletop exercise, field training exercise and after action review—was held in October. The main points highlighted were inclusion of women in disaster management and arrangements for psycho-social trauma care. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's words on greater regional integration and the 10 points on DRR further established India as the

leader of HADR operations in the Bay of Bengal.⁴²

An independent HADR force under BIMSTEC can only be as effective as the member countries strive for it to be. At an individual level, developing harmony and coordination between civilian and military capabilities is necessary, and at the subregional level, BIMSTEC members must foster mutual understanding and cooperation while keeping in mind each other's sensitivity to the protection of national sovereignty.

This brief makes the following specific recommendations:

- Organise joint HADR exercise drills within BIMSTEC;
- Standardise procedures for evacuation, a common legal framework, capacity building;
- Share best practices among the members; and
- Consider building an independent HADR force under BIMSTEC. [ORF](#)

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ANNEXURE

India's role in recent natural disasters in the Bay of Bengal*

Incident	Year	Effects of the Incident	HADR collaborative initiatives
Indian Ocean Tsunami (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand)	2004	Massive loss of life and destruction of property. Many were left homeless.	India, despite being itself affected, sent three external relief operations to Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Maldives, which included 32 naval ships, 20 helicopters and 7 aircraft.
Cyclone Sidr-Bangladesh	2007	-Low-lying areas were flooded, causing immense loss of life -Destruction of infrastructure -Collapse of communication, electricity and water supplies	Bangladesh government provided money and resources to victims and re-engaged them in livelihood activities. NGOs ran rehabilitation centres. The Indian Navy was at the forefront of relief operations.
Cyclone Nargis-Myanmar	2008	Loss of life and destruction of property. Massive displacement.	The Indian Navy sent two naval ships, INS Rana and INS Kirpan, to provide relief to the victims under 'Operation Sahayata'.
Cyclone Aila - India, Bangladesh and Bhutan	2012	Loss of life and livelihood. Massive floods, resulting in loss of agricultural crops and contamination of freshwater resources.	All three governments undertook disaster management initiatives. Coastal shelter homes were built and cash and resources were distributed to the displaced.
Cyclone Phailin- Mainly India Bangladesh and to a lesser extent, Nepal, Myanmar and Thailand	2013	Loss of life. Destruction of property. Collapse of infrastructure. Scarcity of commodities.	18 helicopters, 12 aircraft and two warships were kept on standby by the Indian government for rescue and relief operations. Victims were evacuated to shelter homes. HADR apparatus of all affected states provided necessary relief measures.
Uttarakhand Floods-India	2013	Death toll rose to 1,000. Immense loss of property.	India deployed four unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to scan areas. Centre for Science and Environment pointed out that there was need for understanding climatic changes to make India's HADR apparatus more inclusive.
Cyclone Hudhud-India (Odisha and Andhra Pradesh).	2014	Loss of life. Collapse of infrastructure.	The National Disaster Response Force sent 42 teams to undertake evacuation measures. The Indian Navy launched 'Operation Lehar' a massive search and rescue operation, to assess the damage and rush help.
Nepal Earthquake - Nepal, north India, north-west Bangladesh, western Bhutan	2015	Thousands were killed and many were injured. Architecture and property lay in shambles.	Task forces sent to Nepal included the Indian Army and the National Disaster Response Force. The Indian Air Force operationalised repair, helped in evacuation and transportation. Unfamiliarity of terrain, language and replication of aid was a problem. When Nepal's own HADR apparatus fell short of managing the disaster, India filled the vacuum with its own HADR support.
Myanmar Floods	2015	Loss of life. Damaged infrastructure. Flash floods destroyed all physical modes of connectivity.	Evacuation centres were set up. Displaced people were returned to their homes. India extended help after an official request from Myanmar.

ANNEXURE**India's role in recent natural disasters in the Bay of Bengal***

Incident	Year	Effects of the Incident	HADR collaborative initiatives
Cyclone Mora-Bangladesh (Cox Bazaar, Chittagong)	2017	Immense loss of life. 70% of property damaged.	In an act of disaster preparedness, food and shelter had already been arranged by the Bangladesh government for the evacuated people. Medical teams were assigned for their treatment. Cyclone Mora was one of those rare instances when civilian authorities undertook HADR operations. Control rooms were set up and disaster mitigation plans were drawn up. Indian Navy sent two ships to Bangladesh with relief materials and was simultaneously running two HADR operations; one in Sri Lanka and the other in Bangladesh. INS Sumitra was engaged in search and rescue operations after Mora struck Chittagong.

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