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Don't Call it CMOC

Gary Anderson

As the disaster assistance and humanitarian relief operation in Haiti matures, there will need to be a coordination center where the U.S. military, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international relief organizations (IOs), and Haitian governmental ministries can prioritize aid and organize the operation. Whatever we call this coordination center, we should not call it a Civil-Military Coordination Center (CMOC).

CMOCs were formed during complex humanitarian emergencies such as the post-Desert Storm Kurdistan emergency, Somalia, and the Rwanda genocide. They began as ad hoc responses to situations where no host nation government existed to manage humanitarian aid. They usually had an American military officer in charge and they filled a needed coordination function.

Eventually, they found their way into U.S. joint doctrine. In doing so, they morphed from a function that needed to be done into a doctrinal organization replete with a table of organization that is totally inappropriate for a situation like Haiti. Haiti is a simple humanitarian disaster. It has a functioning, if badly damaged, government which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton promised to support in her visit last week. An American led CMOC structure would undermine that objective in the eyes of the Haitian people and the world.

In other simple humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) operations such as SEA ANGEL in Bangladesh, and in the wake of the 2004 Christmas Eve Tsunami, the coordination Centers were run by each of the host nation governments involved. Each had a different name, depending on the country, but all performed CMOC-like functions of coordination and prioritization.

Make no mistake about it, no matter what we call the coordination function, the United States military is the 500 pound gorilla in the room, particularly early in the operation as is the case now in Haiti. We have the bulk of the wholesale and retail distribution assets with our ships and aircraft, and we will provide the critical early communication infrastructure. However, it is critical that the host nation government be seen to be driving the train.

Picking the right American to be our point man in the coordination center is critical. This is true whether the lead dog is military or civilian. He or she needs to be able to give sound advice to the host nation director without overshadowing the local partner, but there is also a time to take that partner aside when things appear to be going off track. In OPERATION SEA ANGEL in Bangladesh, we started out with a civil affairs officer as our representative in the Bangladeshi National Coordination Center; it seemed like a natural fit. After a few days, the Bangladesh

Army General who was appointed as director approached me privately and asked to have him replaced with someone less overbearing. We sent over a helicopter pilot. He had the right combination of tact and firmness to get the job done, and the judgment to stay out of the limelight when there was media around.

Other than not overshadowing the host nation, there is a good practical reason for going with a host nation-led coordination center. In complex humanitarian emergencies, where there is no host nation government present, a CMOC is the only choice. NGOs and IOs do not have to participate and participation is strictly voluntary. However, when the host nation is operating a coordination center, there is an implicit requirement on the part of all foreign and local relief organizations to participate in the center's functions. There will need to be such a center, not just at the national level, but at every major port and air head where major wholesale relief supplies are coming into the country and broken down for retail humanitarian distribution.

This does not mean that the American military doctrine for running CMOCs is useless. There are good guidelines that are useful for any coordination center, and that will be particularly useful for staffs that do not have a great deal of corporate memory on HA/DR operations or have not practiced doing them recently. Even Marines and Sailors, who usually view joint doctrine as a polite suggestion, will concede that there are good doctrinal guidelines if they are tempered with common sense as dictated by the terrain and situation.

The government of Rene Preval is democratically elected, has been attempting to provide Haiti with stable governance, and has been working to curb corruption. If we can help that government to provide firm leadership in this nightmarish catastrophe, we may be providing encouragement for a sea change in Haiti's traditionally abysmal governance situation.

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