



Debris is scattered on the shore in Sri Lanka following the 26 December 2004 tsunami. The tsunami, which took roughly two hours to reach Sri Lanka, resulted from a magnitude 9.1 earthquake off the west coast of northern Sumatra, Indonesia. (Photo courtesy of the Defense Logistics Agency)

# Lessons from “A Team of Teams” CSF-536 and Tsunami Relief

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**I**t was easy to see the tsunami's path when circling at two thousand feet over Banda Aceh, Indonesia, in a C-130 cargo aircraft in early January 2005. The lush green forest of Sumatra's northern tip's higher elevations stood in stark contrast to the dull brown

landscape illustrating the sea's encroachment on nearby lowlands. Even from that altitude it was easy to identify the wall of debris containing cars, trees, buildings, and other items outlining the ocean's high-water mark. This wall clearly separated the lush green from the

dull brown. What looked like the square-shaped rice paddies of southeast Asia were the remains of building foundations of a city that once numbered three hundred thousand. Most of the town's vertical construction did not survive the tsunami's force as the topography of the dull brown landscape was distinctively flat and largely devoid of elevation. Out the aircraft's small window the scene looked as if a giant hand had swept clean anything standing from the wall of debris all the way to the open ocean. It was a grim and terrifying scene.

## Background

This was a firsthand account to the devastation that occurred during the Indian Ocean Tsunami disaster of 26 December 2004. This event was massive in scale, affecting an entire region of the globe while also creating a different problem for each individual country caught within the tsunami's reach. The 9.1 Richter scale earthquake occurred along a 900-mile fault line that connected the India and Sunda tectonic plates.<sup>1</sup> The largest earthquake in the past forty years lasted almost ten minutes with the vibrations from the seismic event felt around the globe.<sup>2</sup> With some wave tops reaching one hundred feet, the tsunami traveled across the Indian ocean at some 500 mph.<sup>3</sup> This geologic event resulted in a series of tsunami wave actions that affected eleven different countries, killed more than two hundred thousand people, displaced 1.7 million, and caused over \$10 billion of damage.<sup>4</sup> Given these staggering numbers and the enormous size of the disaster, the relief operation conducted by Combined Support Force (CSF) 536 remains one of the largest humanitarian efforts in history.<sup>5</sup> The tsunami posed a number of challenges that required pragmatic solutions that were, at that time, beyond the realm of doctrine, standard procedure, or precedent. During the roughly forty-five-day period of "Operation Unified Assistance," CSF-536 developed several practical responses to the challenges posed. The learning curve was steep, some solutions worked better than others, and mistakes were made along the way.

This article addresses the many lessons learned from the tsunami relief effort of 2004–2005 and is based upon input provided by the CSF staff. Serving as the core structure for the CSF headquarters, the III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) in

Okinawa, Japan, collected the most salient concerns from each of its respective staff functions. III MEF commanding general Lt. Gen. Robert R. Blackman, retired, who led the CSF effort, had the foresight to order the documentation of these observations while they were still fresh in the staff's memory. The points made in this article are directly drawn from the after action brief made at his direction. Even though the CSF-536 relief effort is well over a decade old and can now be classified as contemporary history, there are still many lessons to be garnered from this operation that apply to contemporary and future foreign humanitarian assistance operations. Many of these observations are now resident in the current version of Joint Publication (JP) 3-29, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, and this article references a number of these contemporary doctrinal principles.<sup>6</sup> While the CSF operation obviously predates the current JP 3-29, the experiences of CSF-536 in 2004–2005 help illustrate many of the tenets reflected in today's doctrine. This article references only the salient concerns of the III MEF/CSF staff and is not intended to be an all-encompassing review of foreign humanitarian assistance operations or a treatise on JP 3-29.

The disaster affected most of the land mass surrounding the Bay of Bengal to include some countries as far away as Africa. Several nations either rejected U.S. assistance or claimed it unnecessary. However, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand accepted the United States' offer and they became the focus of CSF efforts. Among the three countries requesting support, Indonesia became the hardest logistical challenge as it was the land mass closest to the event with the largest affected population. Additionally, as the disaster response unfolded, request for support also came from the Maldives thus expanding the CSF mission.

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## Mission Statement

As with most disaster operations, trying to determine what happened, the extent of the damage, and just what assistance was required while developing a mission statement was problematic. As the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) staff reached out and helped, the affected host nations (HN) themselves had little idea early on as to the extent of the destruction in their own countries. With cable news networks flashing images of the carnage across TV screens it was easy to see this was a disaster of epic proportions. However,

Blackman to the J-4 (Forward) regarding the response was simply, “think big.” Hardly the kind of definitive guidance planners expect! However, this lack of specificity and definitive requirements is not unusual and will remain a featured characteristic in the early phases of any disaster relief operation.

The CSF-536 role was limited to that of “first responder,” and in essence to “stop the bleeding, start the breathing.” This role had serious implications regarding the nature of assistance provided. As a result, the CSF focused primarily on rescue, remains recovery, initial

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specific immediate requirements to facilitate a recovery had yet to be determined. This was not a point of fault for any affected country; it was just the nature and speed of the disaster. While images were presented to the world were horrific, it would take time to do an actual assessment.

Conflicting accounts of damage, deaths, and requirements were received from different elements of the same country. A nation’s ministry of interior would provide one assessment, while the defense ministry might give another. These early assessments might also be counter to reports received from local governments or eyewitness accounts. Additionally, press coverage of the event might provide a distorted view of the actual situation or the severity of need. This problem was further compounded by the destruction of some communication infrastructure in the affected region, making reporting impossible. A lack of information from a given location was misinterpreted by various organizations as there having been no damage, when in fact such areas were so devastated that it was impossible for any reporting. This posed the dilemma of how to effectively respond to the catastrophe. What was the actual scale, scope, and need of the affected region? How could the United States be effective and respond with the right kind of assistance at the place of greatest need? So vague were the initial requirements that the preliminary planning guidance from

engineering support, and food and water distribution. Subsequently, as a first responder, CSF support was not intended to rebuild permanent fixtures or refurbish national infrastructure for the long term. This carried legal ramifications on items purchased or placed in the region during the CSFs operations. This stipulation limited the construction or emplacement of any permanent structures or capabilities by CSF entities. Long-term repair and assistance fell under the responsibility of the HN or various foreign aid programs from the U.S. Department of State (DOS), the United Nations (UN), or other international agencies.<sup>7</sup> Working with these other organizations was a key part of the CSF operations and an imperative to an effective response. Furthermore, the determination of transition from first responder to rebuilding and recovery was a cooperative decision on the part of these various external agencies. A cooperative approach was the hallmark of the operations, and the CSF drew support from other nonmilitary and international aid agencies. As a result, the CSF adopted the term “a team of teams.”

Given these parameters and the unknown nature of the disaster, the mission statement required sufficient flexibility, yet needed to provide enough guidance for military planners. Debate ensued between the III MEF/CSF staff and the USPACOM J-5 on the verbiage of the CSF mission statement. Like most military



An MH-60S Knighthawk from Helicopter Combat Support Squadron 11 embarked aboard USS *Bonhomme Richard* Expeditionary Strike Group Five (ESG-5) delivers much-needed materials and supplies to the inhabitants of Meuloboh, Sumatra, on 16 January 2005. ESG-5 participated in Operation Unified Assistance, a multinational relief effort to bring food, water, and medical care to victims of the 26 December 2004 tsunami disaster. More than eighteen thousand service members with Combined Support Force 536 worked with international military and commercial organizations to aid the affected people of Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia after a magnitude 9.1 earthquake triggered the devastating tsunamis. (Photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Felix Garza Jr., U.S. Navy)

operations the mission set morphed over time, but the initial task stated,

CSF-536, in support of USAID/OFDA, provides humanitarian assistance/disaster relief support to the governments of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia and other affected nations in order to minimize loss of life and mitigate human suffering.

On order, transition US Military HA/DR activities to designated agencies and/or Host Nations, in order to facilitate continuity of relief and redeployment.<sup>8</sup>

To the military professional, the mission statement above appears amorphous. There is little definitive guidance regarding specific tasks or a clearly defined end state. To start, the military was in support of the U.S. Office of Aid for International Development/

Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA). Both organizations are the lead agencies for the U.S. government in disaster response abroad.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, DOS is always the lead agency for U.S. foreign affairs despite its small organizational size and lack of material resources.<sup>10</sup> Close coordination between the CSF staff and the various DOS country teams was essential. As a result, such operations required unified action regarding the coordination, synchronization, and integration with various federal entities.<sup>11</sup>

## Civilian Integration

While the CSF mission statement put military assets in support of civilian-led efforts, USAID/OFDA are not large-standing organizations and do not have assets and equipment to effect immediate assistance. Both organizations arrange, contract, and procure

services for disaster relief, and like DOS, have very little organic capability. So how does the CSF support these organizations as tasked? This takes us back to the initial responder role of the military mission. Until USAID/OFDA fully established themselves in the region, they helped to advise the CSF staff regarding initial disaster relief operations while assisting in the transition to long-term recovery and eventual handover of responsibilities. The CSF provided those services and functions that emerged as the most critical during these first few weeks, while USAID/OFDA made their assessments for long-term support. This was an imperative of the long-term recovery operation.

But this situation also raised the question, who is in charge? The HN? The UN? USAID/OFDA? DOS? Local governments? The CSF? Obviously, none of these answers is fully correct. It was a combination of one or more at certain times working together to develop a path ahead or for a given course of action. This required delicate and nuanced diplomacy on the part of all involved to ensure cooperation and understanding. While the DOS is the simple default answer for U.S. entities, the DOS lacks the material and manpower resources to fully assume the role. This required a combined effort on the part of the U.S. government. Key to this effort was the placement of military liaison officers at various U.S. embassies to provide information and advice on CSF capabilities and limitations. Placement of liaison officers often required some of the most knowledgeable military planners to embed themselves with the various country teams. While many civilian agencies are willing to demur to military capability and advice, they often have an inflated idea of military reach, tasking, and flexibility. A key component to a shared understanding is the relationship of the military liaison officers/representatives to the U.S. civilian, international, and HN personnel. This prevents misperceptions and helps manage expectations. This is also an important element in the public affairs effort and communicates U.S. strategic intent.<sup>12</sup>

## Command and Control

While the civilian-military relationship requires nuance and understanding, the same is required with those in uniform from the international community. In this case the CSF had no real tasking ability to other nations' military assets. Ships, planes, people, and supplies

from participating militaries remained under control of their parent countries and did not lose their autonomy regarding potential CSF taskings. National caveats and limitations were always applicable. As a result, the terms "operational control" or "tactical control" as defined in the JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, and other doctrinal manuals did not apply in this combined structure.<sup>13</sup> In coordination with our partner militaries the CSF merely exercised "hand-shake control." This means that both the United States and foreign militaries understood the cooperative nature of the endeavor without having the authority for direct tasking. Certainly not a doctrinal term or even definable, "hand-shake con" implied an innate understanding and cooperation on the part of all present to help regardless of formal lines of communication and command.

This same kind of relationship existed with the various international aid communities that came to help. Several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private volunteer organizations (PVOs) along with the UN showed up and attached themselves in some form to the CSF effort. Again, with no formal tasking authority, military personnel tried to include these organizations in the relief effort. Like national caveats from participating militaries, these civilian aid agencies have their own missions, rules, mandates, and funding lines. CSF personnel found some of these organizations often filling only niche requirements in line with their stated mandates.

Additionally, working with the UN was new to most of the uniformed personnel. A crowd of "blue hatted" personnel arrived from the World Health Organization, World Food Program, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Joint Logistics Command, Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and many others to assist. However, much like the NGOs/PVOs and foreign militaries that arrived, these individual UN agencies have their own mandates, missions, and funding lines. They each provide certain functions and taskings just like other relief organizations. Specific mission sets belong to certain UN agencies. Do not ask them to cross purpose. Also, just because a person wears the powder blue UN hat, do not assume they are fully knowledgeable with the entire organization's presence. The UN is very much an umbrella agency for various organizations as it is akin to the Department of Defense (DOD). For example, a soldier in the U.S. Army may not be knowledgeable





A Landing Craft Air Cushion (LCAC) vehicle assigned to USS *Bonhomme Richard* and Expeditionary Strike Group Five, delivers needed materials and supplies on 10 January 2005 to the citizens in the city of Meulaboh on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia. The LCACs are capable of transporting more supplies than helicopters in a single trip. (Photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Bart A. Bauer, U.S. Navy)

about U.S. Navy or Air Force missions, functions, and operations for any given operation. The UN is much the same way with its organizations. Do not expect the World Health Organization representative to be fluent in the mission and organization of his UN High Commissioner for Refugees counterpart. As a result, it is incumbent upon military personnel to acquire familiarity with UN structures to understand how these organizations individually function.

Additionally, some nations or agencies refused to join the CSF effort but were still authorized by the HNs to provide support. As a result, the CSF had to honor other organizations conducting operations in the Relief Operations Area (ROA: To downplay the military's role in this endeavor, the term "Area of Operations" was avoided. The CSF leadership developed the term "Relief Operations Area" to underscore the humanitarian nature of the mission.). Regardless of the termination, the CSF still had to provide sequencing and management

services for these external missions. This was especially problematic if no prior coordination was done beforehand. It was not uncommon to find an unidentified ship or aircraft arriving in the ROA without coordination with either the HN or the CSF. Unwelcomed entities often came into the ROA without authorization and had to be ushered away or reported to HN authorities. This was especially the case when an unidentified Beechcraft King Air aircraft attempted to land on the damaged airfield near Meulaboh, Indonesia. The crew obviously did not do its preflight planning as the landing strip was torn in two by the tsunami's force. With the runway fractured, upon landing, the aircraft rolled off the surviving paved runway only to have its landing gear collapse in the mud. Who the plane belonged to, what it was doing, and the fate of the crew remained unknown to CSF personnel. Events like this required flexibility and responsiveness on the part of the CSF to work around these unexpended events and potential friction points.

Concurrently, many VIPs from the international community felt they too had a need to visit the affected region. Whether for political or public relation reasons, these select individuals were given permission to access the ROA and see the damage firsthand or witness/participate in the aid effort. Usually, such VIP visits required a resequencing of movement, operations, or additional security. While frustrating to those who are providing aid, a VIP bureau of some kind is helpful to coordinate these visits and hopefully make them as minimally disruptive as possible. Referred to as “disaster tourism,” these visitors and their baggage are unfortunately a part of the disaster scenario. In this same vein, the international press often chartered their own aircraft or ships to get the photos and graphics for their accompanying reports. This was certainly a part of the unknown parties that often arrived in the ROA.

## Perception Management

While the mission statement specified supporting USAID/OFDA, the CSF was also tasked with assisting the HNs affected. The three nations mentioned in the mission statement formally asked for assistance from the United States, but the CSF understood that state sovereignty was a paramount concern. CSF personnel were invited by the affected countries and worked at the behest of HN governments.<sup>14</sup> Given this relationship, U.S. military personnel were in a supporting role to the three requesting nations and were careful not to give the appearance of supplanting local or state governments. In working with HN representatives as much as possible, U.S. aid was provided in coordination with local officials. This was especially important in Indonesia in 2005. Home to the largest Muslim population in the world, the ongoing efforts of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom cast their shadow over Indonesian archipelago. The optics of U.S. military intervention in this religiously devout population was a clear concern with force protection measured balanced given the mission statement.

National sovereignty was especially important as the CSF footprint expanded in each HN. While unified action requires the control of the air, land, maritime, space, and other domains, a clearly defined relationship with the HN regarding these venues will avoid overstep or confusion.<sup>15</sup> For example, during the CSF operations the northern tip of Sumatra had only one working airfield

with little military apron space for unloading aircraft. With contributing nations willing to provide aid via airlift, the Banda Ache airfield and surrounding air space required a much more robust airspace management and terminal control capability. U.S. Air Force Tanker Air Lift Control teams provided this capability at the behest of the national authorities. The Indonesian government allowed U.S. Air Force personnel to control airflow to and from the surrounding airspace, sequencing runway use, and managing offload operations. This is an important cooperative element in the mission’s success.

With Indonesia willing to waive some national sovereignty to facilitate recovery operations, Thailand also cooperated in much the same manner. Key to the entire operation was the CSF regional air hub at Utapao, Thailand. This Royal Thai Naval Air Base with its ample runways and expansive parking apron also housed the CSF headquarters and its international contingent.<sup>16</sup> Dozens of military and civilian cargo aircraft from around the world were parked, serviced, and deployed from this single, yet important location. A former Air Force B-52 base during the Vietnam War, the facility was more than adequate for the CSF mission. Use of this base was a clear success of PACOM’s Theater Security Cooperation efforts in the region as it had been used previously for earlier Cobra Gold exercises. Furthermore, the CSF headquarters building on the naval base was constructed years earlier for combined exercises with our regional partners with this cooperative effort paying dividends.

## Confusion Reigns

As the mission statement wording regarding support to USAID/OFDA was vague, so too were the taskings regarding the three countries requesting support. Just what specifically the CSF was to provide Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Indonesia was left purposefully vague as assessments of the relief requirements were still under determination. Given the initial confusion and lack of information, specific aid requirements remained unknown. As a result, as mission analysis occurred, parallel efforts such as execution, deployment, transition, and redeployment actions all happened simultaneously. This uncertainty led to many cases of confusion and mistakes, but eventually the CSF determined that each country required a different, tailored kind of assistance: Thailand required mostly forensics and human remains recovery



support, Sri Lanka needed engineering and debris removal, and Indonesia lacked largely in food and water distribution. As a result, the assistance provided was not a “one size fits all” and the CSF had to prioritize and reallocate assets and personnel to each country as the situation unfolded. Furthermore, in the later stages of the operation the island nation of the Maldives also asked for limited assistance. Despite the Maldives absence in the original mission statement, CSF supported the emergent request. Given the new request for support, there was a small amount of “mission creep” involved in

that appeared to be outside the humanitarian tasking.<sup>18</sup> Terms and titles were created to minimize the “military flavor” of the effort while enhancing the sole humanitarian intent behind the American presence. To highlight this message, the term “combined support force” was derivative of the doctrinally accepted term of combined task force.<sup>19</sup> The change of the term “support” for “task” was deliberate as it attempted to downplay the military’s inherent combat missions. This was designed to convey a message of help and cooperation not just to those affected, but to the world in general.

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the operation given the nebulous mission statement. For current and future considerations, JP 3-29 also advises that military commanders should not commit forces beyond the FHA mission.<sup>17</sup> However, this solitary instance of mission creep was controlled did not expand into a long-term commitment or misuse of military assets.

In addition, the mission statement gave no real metric as to mission accomplishment or success. As with most military mission statements, a given end state often includes terms like seize, secure, block, occupy, etc. Such directive goals are usually measurable and definitive. However, with the unknown extent of the tsunami’s damage, the amount of support required, and questions about the HN’s ability to respond, no definitive end state could be articulated. How was the CSF to know when the mission was accomplished? While the mission statement specified “Providing humanitarian assistance,” this is hardly a measurable tasking. This open-ended mission statement led to debate as to the transition criteria for the hand over to U.S. AID/OFDA and determination as to when the CSF fulfilled its mission.

## Names Matter

As mentioned earlier, and given the 2005 time frame, the optics of U.S. military intervention was a concern. While there for only disaster relief purposes, the CSF still had to step carefully and avoid actions

Additionally, the doctrinally established term “civil-military operations center” (CMOC) was also changed. Currently, JP 3-29 defines CMOCs as an organization to facilitate coordination of U.S. military activities with indigenous populations, the private sector, international organizations, multinational forces, or other government entities.<sup>20</sup> However, many in the international aid community had bad experiences operating with CMOCs. To some in this community, CMOCs were often seen as the military’s way of “pigeon holing” civilian agencies in a given theater and simply removing them as obstacles. While the validity of such observations is debatable, in this operation the CSF endeavored to include international aid agencies and embrace them as part of the unified action. This again action references the “team of teams” approach of the CSF.

To facilitate this message and avoid the CMOC stigma, the CSF established the Combined Coordination Center (CCC) as part of the J-3 section. Including all the international aid agencies, the CCC served as a kind of “clearing” or “brokerage house” for communication, taskings, and cooperation. Once the J-3 received a request for support, the approved submission was vetted through the CCC for servicing. In this effort the CCC provided a venue for external agencies to receive taskers, fulfill requirements, and provide aid that fell within its capabilities. With this system in place the





A village sits in ruins after the area was struck by the 26 December 2004 tsunami, seen here from the window of a CH 46E helicopter on 7 January 2005. Marines and sailors of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit and USS *Bonhomme Richard* were in Indonesia to provide food, supplies, and humanitarian aid to help victims of the tragic event. (Photo by Lance Cpl. Thomas J. Grove, U.S. Marine Corps)

CSF worked together with many external organizations to enable relief. If the civilian agencies within the CCC could not support the request, then it became a CSF tasker and completed by U.S. military personnel. In this method international organizations were leveraged first with the United States providing the structure for taskings and then serving as “backstop” for unfulfilled taskers. Current doctrine also endorses such delegation of responsibility in fulfillment of requirements while attempting to mitigate friction between organizations.<sup>21</sup> While the “backstop” role was leveraged extensively and provided the bulk of initial responder assistance, it was important to use all the tools and assets available.

## Mission Termination?

In addition, the CSF was also concerned with the perception of how to withdraw from the region in a timely, yet not premature, manner. To avoid the perception of disingenuous support and a shallow public

relations action on the part of the United States, how should the CSF disengage? How does the military retrograde while ensuring the recovery effort continues? To avoid this perception the CSF used the term “transition” instead of “disengagement.” Related to this concern was how to measure operational effectiveness of the relief effort. While JP 3-29 address this issue, it provides little guidance on determination.<sup>22</sup> What metrics should the CSF use to determine mission accomplishment given the vague nature of the initial tasking? Should metrics include objective or subjective criteria? When did the CSF know it was time to leave? The CSF looked to exercise what Blackman referred to as “dinner party rules.” We did not want to be “the first to go, nor the last to leave.” For this important question a combination of factors would help identify when to “transition” to civilian or HN responsibility.

Measures of effectiveness are a key component regarding the determination of mission accomplishment.

But just what should those measures of effectiveness be? Mortality rates? Numbers of dislocated people? Incidents of disease?<sup>23</sup> The CSF looked at the nature of support requests coming from the respective counties and the type of aid needed. Instead of initial responder requests like medical supplies, food, and other essentials for life support, were requests for sustainment, rebuilding materials, and other more permanent items appearing that might hint at the changing nature of the situation? The CSF also reviewed the number of requests for support submitted and even the tonnage of items. If the trend was dropping, then maybe the various relief agencies had effectively established themselves and gained a foothold in the area. Along this line of reasoning the number of flights or lift requirements to move materials and supplies could also provide another metric. Less movement of supplies and equipment on the part of the CSF might indicate a transition to the rebuilding phase and the long-term recovery.

Subjectively, the CSF turned to the HN themselves, the country teams, and the international aid community. What were their assessments of the recovery effort? Did these non-U.S. military entities determine they could confidently take on the long-term requirements? Did they feel as if the initial responder phase had passed? Contemporary doctrine as articulated in JP 3-29 also outlines the concern for such subjective measures.<sup>24</sup> For this the CSF consulted with UN, NGOs/PVOs, USAID/OFDA, and the international aid community representatives for their assessments. Perhaps more importantly was input from the HNs themselves. The first nation to make such an assessment was Thailand. By mid-January authorities in Phuket determined they could manage further forensic operations and CSF personnel withdrew from the area.

As a result, a mix of both subjective and objective criteria were used to determine the transition from military to civilian support and the reduction of CSF operations. A consensus of opinions determined that 2 February 2005 was the date the CSF elements could begin their withdrawal. However, to ensure mission success, Blackman directed CSF assets remain in place until it was apparent the civilian or HN agencies could indeed handle the rebuilding mission on the given date. To underpin his concern, he told the staff, “We will not let them fail,” and had the CSF remain for a few days after these various agencies claimed U.S. military support

was no longer required. In this case, these agencies did indeed have the capability and by mid-February the CSF was disestablished. Keen to give the best perception possible, Blackman wanted to transition as soon as possible only after the recovery/rebuilding stage was ready and well in hand. In his words it was important to “get off the stage while they are still clapping.”

## Joint and Combined Staffing

As the III MEF staff served as the core organization for the CSF headquarters, it lacked the size and experience to command such an effort. The MEF headquarters had to grow from an operational level command element to a strategic one. Furthermore, as an organization the MEF had to expand and become not just a joint staff, but also a combined one. Given the global response, the CSF incorporated thirty-three foreign militaries, several UN organizations, and other NGOs/PVOs. This expansion of the relatively small and Marine-centric command element required significant coordination and assistance.

While formal joint tasking for individual augments (IAs) is a standard methodology, given the nature of the exigency, this process was slow and cumbersome. By the time the MEF requested additional staff augmentation via USPACOM, then USPACOM tasked to the various service components, then service components tasked to the respective commands for fulfillment, weeks had passed. Many requested IAs showed up from their contributing commands and arrived in the ROA only after CSF operations were already beginning to slow down and the first responder missions abated. While not the fault of the IAs, it was indicative of a slow, cumbersome tasking process. Fortunately, many organizations did not wait for formal taskings, took the initiative, and deployed personnel directly to the CSF headquarters. This was especially true of the Navy Regional Contracting Cell (NRCC) in Singapore, many representatives from U.S. Transportation Command, and the U.S. Air Force Tanker Airlift Control Elements. Organizations like these “leaned forward,” sending IAs before the formal requests were submitted. This initiative on the part of the sister services made a huge difference by providing their IAs expertise to the core MEF staff during the crucial early phases of the operation.

## Force Protection

While the operation was specifically designed for humanitarian purposes, force protection measures



were still a requirement to safeguard U.S. personnel and equipment.<sup>25</sup> While FHA operations can occur in permissive, uncertain, or hostile environments, the tactical status of U.S. personnel must be determined.<sup>26</sup> Given the nature of the disaster, the CSF expected some form of societal breakdown to occur and create a dangerous environment for both victim and aid provider. DOD Directive 5100.46, *Foreign Disaster Relief*, establishes policy that allows local military commanders at the immediate scene to take prompt action to save human lives.<sup>27</sup> While having such authority, the commander

Adding to the force protection concerns, two internal separatist actions had already been taking place within the ROA when the tsunami occurred. In Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers on the northern part of the island had waged a bloody and violent campaign for years seeking their independence. Furthermore, in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, another separatist movement looked for independence or at least a form of limited autonomy from the government in Jakarta. CSF personnel were deploying into the middle of these ongoing domestic conflicts. Fortunately, all sides in these struggles agreed to cease

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should seek the concurrence of the HN if possible. Again, for Indonesia, the perception of U.S. military intervention in a predominantly Muslim country was a concern. How should prudent protection measures be taken without appearing militarily aggressive? This required a delicate balance. U.S. military personnel could not arrive in full battle gear, weapons drawn, while offering humanitarian rations! Aid given at gunpoint was obviously not the image the CSF wished to portray.

This situation required nuance between providing aid while ensuring force protection and safety. The decision was made to minimize personal combat equipment carried by U.S. military personnel. For marines, this meant the wearing of a soft cover, H-harness with canteens, but with weapons hidden. Military personnel had firearms for force protection, but they were not brandished or used as props for crowd control. Pistols were carried; however, they were placed within the small of the back or other location not immediately visible. For aircrew of either fixed or rotary wing, crew served, or individual weapons were onboard but were not brandished or widely visible to the local communities. While still maintaining their inherent right to self-defense, U.S. personnel were judicious in their application of protection measures. Fortunately for all involved there were no instances of violence or attacks upon CSF aid providers.

fire, allowing CSF personnel to move freely from area to area and distribute aid. There was also a concern with the poor human rights record of the Tentara Nasional Indonesia, the Indonesian Army, given the rebel activity in this area. Again, working at the behest of the HN, Tentara Nasional Indonesia officers were leveraged in the delivery of aid regardless of history. Had these arrangements not been made, the CSF mission would have been severely compromised and aid delivery more difficult. Certainly a “good news” story in this operation; future FHA operations may not be so fortunate.

These internal conflicts raised another question. To whom should aid be provided within a given country with rebel factions present? While many CSF representatives worked with local military and civilian officials at the behest of the HN government, should aid also be given to rebel forces for subsequent distribution? Would that provide tacit approval of rebel claims or motivations? Furthermore, how does one determine who is a “rebel” and who is just a citizen holding a weapon? Unwilling to make such determinations, this was an issue in which the CSF did not discriminate. Aid was provided to whomever or wherever it was needed regardless of government uniform or civilian attire. While local government officials were leveraged as much as possible for distribution of aid, the CSF provided support to anyone who needed it and had their hands open. For this FHA

operation, it was not for the U.S. military to determine who had a legitimate status and distribution of aid was based upon solely upon human need.

This same approach is also advocated by the UN regarding its “Humanitarian Principles.” Based upon the pillars of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and operational independence, FHA operations gain access to the affected populations and avoid the partisan quagmire. JP-39 also endorses such an approach in general; however, a given situation may require a suspension of any of the four.<sup>28</sup> While a given FHA mission may evolve and require a change in force protection measures, military planners must give great thought to the combat condition of deployed forces. Intelligence briefings, rules of engagement criteria, and mitigation training can help preclude a humanitarian operation from turning violent.<sup>29</sup>

Given the distribution of aid in such an environment, the issue of graft and corruption regarding humanitarian supplies was also raised. Fully cognizant that some aid would be stolen for criminal intent and profit, the CSF did not see that as an issue for U.S. concern. During the operation the CSF estimated as much as 20 percent of aid provided was siphoned off for the black market, stockpiled, or sold for monetary gain. Knowing the reality of this situation, aid was provided to the HN populations regardless of the criminal element. This question was looked upon as an internal issue for the respective government to determine and not U.S. military personnel. Having witnessed previous FHA operations, and while certainly a frustrating waste of taxpayer dollars, it is a reality of the environment. Such criminality occurs in most, if not all, humanitarian aid efforts, but the overriding imperative is the provision of aid.

As mentioned before, this was an international effort with many nations working together to help. However, perceptions do matter, and it was important to safeguard national security information despite the benevolent nature of the operation. In this regard, sharing intelligence and data with the international community can be problematic. Joint planning and execution system data and access to the time-phased force and deployment data reports were still valid security concerns. While the international community was incorporated into the CSF headquarters both physically and organizationally, the staff had to ensure that non-U.S. personnel and civilians did not have access to classified information/databases. Furthermore, it was important to not overtly exclude

them from certain discussions and information. With operational security still an imperative, careful verbiage and thoughtful language could help convey meaning without compromising information and data.

## Data Collection and Dissemination

Tensions between the need for securing classified data versus the civilian requirement for relevant information are an inherent part of the environment.<sup>30</sup> This caused a few problems during the operation as our fellow militaries and relief workers did not have the same visibility on ship or aircraft taskings as that of U.S. military personnel. Furthermore, some of the imagery and intelligence collected by U.S. assets was done via classified means and could not be shared with our partner nations. Satellites and reconnaissance photographs obtained by U.S. platforms were helpful in mission analysis and course of action development for the joint contingent, but some of this imagery was not cleared for non-DOD personnel. Furthermore, such information was also important to the HNs themselves. Given the situation, many of the HNs were sensitive as to the kind of information released about their own countries to the international community. This too required nuance and diplomacy to assuage HN national security fears in hopes of building trust and understanding.

## Push versus Pull

Initially the kind of supplies required by the affected nations was guesswork on the part of the CSF staff. As mentioned earlier, each nation required a tailored response to the tsunami, and it affected each country in a different manner. But before the disaster relief picture became clearer the CSF “pushed” supplies ashore anticipating the immediate requirements. During these first few weeks that meant largely food and water. But were we pushing the right kind of supplies? Should we be pushing something else? What did these people need specifically? These were questions that CSF staffers were constantly asking during the first few weeks of the operation. Frustrated by a lack of definitive requirements or requests, a veteran UN disaster planner dryly informed the CSF staff that at this stage of a relief operation, “you’ll never know what people will need ... it just takes time.”<sup>31</sup>

Pushed provisions were purchased via local merchants through the NRCC and transported to the



affected region. Today DOD joint contracting services are available globally and should be leveraged by U.S. forces in such instances.<sup>32</sup> The NRCC in Singapore was key to efficient provision of supplies with the Navy's Combat Logistics Force providing quick delivery through naval platforms via the straits of Malacca. Furthermore, the kinds of items procured under the auspices of the CSF mission fell under the title of Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid. This funding line has very specific parameters for purchases and should not be viewed as a "slush fund" or a "blank check" during the FHA operations.<sup>33</sup> All purchases were subject to legal review with a few requests generating lively debate among judge advocate general (JAGs) staffs. Given the first responder mission, the classification of "permanent" or "expeditionary" acquisitions required legal interpretation in some cases. Use of DOD contracting services and continuous oversight of Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid funding will help alleviate potential legal problems.

Given the large scale of the operation, the CSF also had access to a large stockpile of emergency supplies and equipment located in the USPACOM area of responsibility. Some of this was afloat on maritime prepositioned ships, but much of it was warehoused in forward bases in the Pacific. The J-4 was armed with the entire catalog of available stocks for delivery. When presented with a spreadsheet listing these supplies, the affected nation's representatives located at the CSF headquarters responded eagerly and predictably, "Yes! We will take all of it!" When informed that American largess had its limits and they could not have all of it, they eventually developed a shopping list of requirements. Eventually HN representatives began to call for specific supplies. This helped define a more precise flow of required materials and assisted in the development of prioritized lift requirements. However, during the first few weeks "pushing" supplies and guessing was better than withholding supplies while people suffered. Eventually the need did reveal itself.

## Communications

To facilitate open electronic communications as much as possible the CSF relied largely upon open-source email service and cell phones. While joint planning and execution system data certainly needed to be secure, coordination via email or cell phone was

often done on civilian networks to communicate with as much of the international aid community as possible. SIPRNET was used only in a few cases, especially when communicating with U.S. Navy platforms at sea, but most the communication and coordination was done via previously established internet agreements with local civilian networks. For the future, use of the All Partners Access Network can go a long way into providing a unified communication network with our civilian and military partners.<sup>34</sup> The use of civilian networks was indeed a risk, but it was also the most efficient way of communication with all involved.

## Final Thoughts

In conclusion, the CSF-536 experience was a good one. Despite the overwhelming and tragic loss of life and property, many in the global community came together to help aid those in need. Many of the lessons learned during the operation were not necessarily unique to this disaster and can still serve as examples to aid in future endeavors or at least provide perspective. Blackman observed that CSF-536 was dealt a "good hand of cards" regarding this disaster. By mid-February the CSF was disestablished and the hard work of rebuilding by the HNs, USAID/OFDA, and the UN began. One of the highlights of the CSF effort was that it established a period of close relationships with Indonesia and opened a door for further cooperation. Furthermore, it solidified our bonds with our allies in this important and strategic region of the world.

Operation Unified Assistance had cooperative partners, good theater geometry, lift options with both sea and air platforms, used established agreements, and operated in permissive environment. Looking back some fifteen years the general was correct—we had "good cards." For the future, current doctrine as articulated in JP 3-29 establishes an excellent framework and units tasked with FHA operations are advised to give it a thorough review. While the CSF-536 experience was a "good news story," future disaster responses may indeed be harder, more complex, and even opposed. The ambiguities, unknowns, and guess work will remain part of any such operation. However, flexibility, cooperative relationships, and a shared understanding in such confusing and constantly changing environments will remain key aspects to an effective FHA response. ■

## Notes

1. Pacific Coastal and Marine Science Center, "Tsunami Generation from 2004 M=9.1 Sumatra-Andaman Earthquake," U.S. Geological Survey, 8 October 2018, accessed 22 September 2021, [https://www.usgs.gov/centers/pcmsc/science/tsunami-generation-2004-m91-sumatra-andaman-earthquake?qt-science\\_center\\_objects=0#qt-science\\_center\\_objects](https://www.usgs.gov/centers/pcmsc/science/tsunami-generation-2004-m91-sumatra-andaman-earthquake?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects).
2. National Science Foundation, "Analysis of Sumatra-Andaman Earthquake Reveals Longest Fault Rupture Ever," news release no. 05-079, accessed 22 September 2021, [https://www.nsf.gov/news/news\\_summ.jsp?cntn\\_id=104179](https://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=104179).
3. "What Happened During the 2004 Sumatra Earthquake," California Institute of Technology, accessed 22 September 2021, <http://www.tectonics.caltech.edu/outreach/highlights/sumatra/what.html>.
4. "2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami," UNICEF USA, accessed 21 September 2021, <https://www.unicefusa.org/mission/emergencies/tsunamis/2004-south-asia>; "Sumatra: Indonesian Earthquake and Tsunami, 26 December 2004," National Centers for Environment Information, accessed 21 September 2021, <https://www.ngdc.noaa.gov/hazard/26dec2004.html>.
5. How one defines largest is a matter of conjecture. Cost? Number of people involved in the relief effort? Size of the devastation? Number affected?
6. Joint Publication (JP) 3-29, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2019), accessed 28 February 2022, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_29.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_29.pdf).
7. Organizations such as the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, U.S. Assistance International Disaster, Foreign Military Sales, World Health Organizations, UN World Food Program, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to name a few.
8. III MEF/Combine Support Force 536 After Action Brief, March 2005. Author's collection.
9. JP 3-29, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, vii, xiv, I-1, II-4.
10. Ibid., II-3.
11. Ibid., viii, I-2.
12. Ibid., IV-5.
13. JP 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2017), III-3.
14. JP 3-29, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, xii, I-3.
15. Ibid., xvii-xviii, I-6.
16. Utapao was an American B-52 base during the Vietnam War and its facilities are reflective of these large bomber operations. This base is used regularly by U.S. Pacific Command units for Cobra Gold exercises with the Thai military with upgrades often provided by the United States. This habitual relationship paid significant dividends for the Combined Support Force (CSF) as CSF-536 occupied the very building it used in a Cobra Gold exercise two years previously.
17. JP 3-29, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, I-9.
18. Ibid., ix.
19. Ibid., II-24.
20. Ibid., xv, II-12-13, II-27.
21. Ibid., IV-1-2.
22. Ibid., 1-15.
23. Ibid., IV-8.
24. Ibid., IV-9.
25. Ibid., xviii.
26. Ibid., III-5.
27. Ibid., I-6.
28. Ibid., 1-3; "OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, accessed 28 February 2022, [https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM\\_HumPrinciple\\_English.pdf](https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM_HumPrinciple_English.pdf).
29. JP 3-29, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, IV-16-10.
30. Ibid., IV-35.
31. Interview with UN representative attached to the CSF 536, 10 January 2005.
32. JP 3-29, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, IV-28-29.
33. Ibid., B-2-4.
34. Ibid., IV-2.