

# The Role of the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force in Disaster Management

Sanjay Badri-Maharaj\*

*A wealthy twin-island nation, Trinidad and Tobago has had few serious disasters to challenge its capacity to cope with such incidents. Although several plans for disaster management exist, these have remained largely theoretical exercises. However, recent instances of devastating earthquakes in Haiti and Japan, with the accompanying tsunami in the latter, have prompted some steps towards an enhanced role for the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force (TTDF) in disaster management. This paper will seek to outline the disaster management framework of Trinidad and Tobago and to highlight the role of the TTDF detailed therein. It will also give a brief outline of the practical experience of the TTDF in regional disaster management and highlight recent steps to improve capabilities. However, it will be shown that, despite these efforts, substantial capability gaps remain and limit the ability of the TTDF to perform its specified disaster management tasks.*

## Introduction

The twin-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago, blessed with an enviable geographical location, is located at the southern end of the Caribbean archipelago, and thus largely excluded from the major hurricane belt that covers most of the Caribbean. Indeed, compared to its neighbours, the nation has been extremely fortunate in escaping the battering that other countries in the region routinely receive from hurricanes.

Trinidad and Tobago last suffered the ravages of a natural calamity on September 30, 1963 when Hurricane Flora struck Tobago, destroying nearly 3,000 homes and damaging nearly 4,000 more homes, rendering thousands homeless. Since then, despite annual disruptive flooding and minor earthquakes, the country has been spared major disasters. This has bred a degree of complacency in the population and, consequently, disaster consciousness is extremely low.

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\* Sanjay Badri-Maharaj received his Ph.D. from the Department of War Studies, King's College London, and specializes in India's Nuclear Arsenal and Paramilitary Forces. He is currently working in Trinidad.

Nonetheless, the country has, on paper, at any rate, taken the risk of natural and man-made catastrophes very seriously and has evolved a comprehensive strategy to deal with any eventuality. Led by the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management under the country's Ministry of National Security, the strategy purports to lay down a series of plans to coordinate the response to any disaster from all state and non-governmental agencies. Exercises are also routinely held with neighbouring countries to enhance cooperation.

This paper examines the role, strengths, and weakness of the TTDF in the national disaster management framework of the country and describe its recent operational experience in this field as well as the steps it has taken to enhance its capabilities.

### **The Hazards and Organisational Framework**

The coordinating agency for disaster management in Trinidad and Tobago is the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management (ODPM) which was created on January 10, 2005, being the successor agency to the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) in the aftermath of the experience of Hurricane Ivan, which devastated Grenada in September 2004 and the Asian tsunami of December 26, 2004.<sup>1</sup>

The ODPM has created a National Response Framework which ostensibly sets out the goals, objectives, and the roles of the various response agencies in the event of a disaster. The NRF has identified a multiplicity of potential hazards that might potentially occur, listing them thus<sup>2</sup>:

1. Flooding
2. Earthquakes
3. Landslides
4. Tornadoes
5. Drought

6. Fires
7. Mud volcanoes
8. Spontaneous combustion of lignite
9. Hurricanes and Tropical Storms
10. Tsunamis and other Coastal Hazards
11. Industrial hazards (such as chemical leaks/spills and explosions)
12. Biological hazards (such as the H1N1 pandemic)
13. Other threats, such as civil unrest, terrorism and cyber attacks.

The ODPM further defined the objectives of the National Response Framework as being to<sup>3</sup>:

1. Protect life, property and livelihood;
2. Reduce suffering;
3. Protect government facilities;
4. Avert the cascading of a single event into a multi-event situation;
5. Protect the economy of the country;
6. Ensure the continuity of government;
7. Ensure efficient and effective restoration of normality for citizens and business enterprise.

Of the disasters detailed above, flooding, fires, and landslides are regular features of the Trinidadian “disaster portfolio”, while the local mud volcano is more of an

irritant than a major threat. However, the country, despite a reasonably well-developed medical infrastructure has no experience in dealing with a major biological emergency; and despite the presence of a very substantial petrochemical sector there has never been a major chemical incident.

The framework established by the ODPM, has established three levels of disaster incidents namely<sup>4</sup>:

**Level 1:** A localised incident. Such incidents fall within the jurisdiction and capacity of the local government authorities and other first responder agencies within a municipality, or the Tobago Emergency Management Agency, in the case of Tobago. The first responder agencies may include the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS), the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service (TTFS), and the health services, as necessary. At Level 1, the Emergency Operations Centre of the Municipal Corporation or Tobago will be activated, as needed, to coordinate the regional, borough, or city response.

**Level 2:** The emergency or disaster event usually affects two or more municipal regions/Tobago, or while confined to one municipality, may be of a very serious nature but can still be dealt with by using the resources available at the municipal and/or national level.

If it is perceived that a Level 1 incident has the potential to escalate to a Level 2 event, the ODPM's National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) would be notified and become partially activated in order to monitor and, if necessary, coordinate a response to the incident.

**Level 3:** Should the national resources be overwhelmed, the resident will declare a national emergency with foreign assistance being requested, if necessary.

As can be seen from this categorisation, much emphasis is placed on action at the municipal level and it is here that the entire scheme becomes unhinged. Though Trinidad and Tobago requires that Disaster Management Units exist at the level of the municipal authorities, these units are farcical groups of no more than four individuals, bereft of either training or specialised equipment.<sup>5</sup>

The Trinidad and Tobago Police and Fire Services are designated as first response units, and while the latter is reasonably well-equipped and capable of coping with minor incidents resulting from flooding, landslides, and accidents, it lacks the resources, discipline, and facilities to cope with a major disaster. The Police are ill-equipped to participate in anything other than site control and, as such, more serious incidents will inevitably lead to the involvement of the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force.

### **The TTDF in Disaster Management**

The TTDF consists of the Trinidad and Tobago Regiment (TTR), the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard (TTCG), the Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard (TTAG), and the Defence Force Reserves (TTDFR) with a total strength of some 5,165 personnel. All personnel and assets are earmarked for employment in disaster relief operations but the TTDF is assigned specific tasks by the ODPM.

Under the terms of the National Response Framework the TTDF is tasked with the following roles in the event of a disaster<sup>6</sup>:

- a) Assisting the TTFS and TTPS with search and rescue operations, and TTPS with law enforcement, during an emergency above Level 1.
- b) Assisting the Ministry of the People and Social Development (MOPSD) to provide mass care services such as shelter, food, and first aid.
- c) Assisting the Ministry of Local Government Disaster Management Units and the ODPM with damage and needs assessments after an incident.
- d) Assisting the MOPSD with the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information in order to facilitate the overall provision of services and resources during an emergency or disaster.

The 3rd Battalion (Engineers) of the TTR is tasked with working directly under the ODPM to spearhead the TTDF's assigned tasks as per the National Response Framework. The TTCG is assigned to undertake all maritime functions such as transport and maritime search, and rescue; the TTAG is to provide air transport and along with the Police Air Support Unit to provide imagery support from its

surveillance assets to facilitate a Common Operating Picture of disaster-affected areas.<sup>7</sup> All personnel are expected to participate in relief operations.

### **TTDF Regional Experience in Disaster Relief**

Following the destruction wrought by Hurricane Ivan on the neighbouring island of Grenada in September 2004 (killing 39 people and doing extensive damage), the TTDF embarked on what has become its largest disaster relief operation to date.<sup>8</sup>

In an unprecedented display of civil disorder, security forces from Grenada had to secure buildings in the capital, St George's, while its residents on foot or in cars with smashed windshields scavenged for scarce water, food, and gasoline. Extensive looting of businesses occurred while the roofs of homes were blown off and more buildings were badly battered, including the island's hotels and public buildings. Grenada's economy was totally destroyed, its nutmeg crop and industry wrecked, and tourism devastated. York House, the home of the Grenada Parliament was also destroyed. There was a complete breakdown of law and order, and looting was so extensive and endemic that then Prime Minister, Keith Mitchell, whose home was also destroyed, had to ask the CARICOM (Caribbean Community) for assistance.<sup>9</sup>

Following the devastating impact of the Hurricane, the TTDF swung into action, arriving some 48 hours before any other Caribbean troops, and gradually building up into the largest contingent on the island.<sup>10</sup> Deploying over 150 troops in a Joint Support Group (JSG), the TTDF transported some 1,276 tonnes of food and water along with 638 tonnes of construction material to Grenada. It played a pivotal role in restoring law and order in Grenada, provided relief and succour to the affected population, and helped to avert a health crisis by disposing of carcasses.<sup>11</sup>

Appreciating that the individual nations of the Caribbean would be hard pressed to cope with a major disaster on their own, the lessons learnt from Hurricane Ivan and the Asian tsunami of December 2004 led to greater efforts for synergy among Caribbean nations as well as for creating a viable disaster response structure under the auspices of CDEMA (Caribbean Disaster Management Agency). Much of this revolved around drawing up plans to facilitate mutual assistance and to seeking advice on disaster mitigation—advice which has been very patchily applied.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, exercises took place in isolation and emergency plans were rarely discussed, much less practised with public participation. However, the Haitian

earthquake of 2010 and the Japanese earthquake and tsunami of 2011 provided some much needed impetus for capacity building.

For the TTDF, this involved the 3rd (Engineering) Battalion of the TTR slowly developing the capability to undertake Collapsed Structure Search and Rescue (CSSR) operations in the event of earthquakes.<sup>13</sup> In 2011, the TTDF participated along with the armed forces of Suriname and Guyana in a major simulation exercise which revolved around an earthquake of significant magnitude striking Trinidad under the umbrella of the US-sponsored Furezas Aliadas Humanitarias (FA-HUM) scheme.<sup>14</sup> The FA-HUM 2011 was accorded extremely high priority by the TTDF and took place over the course of 11 days between April 4 and 11, 2011.

### **Capability Gaps Remain**

While the TTDF, has participated in regional exercises and made efforts to fulfil the tasks assigned to it under the ODPM, a substantial capability gap still persists in terms of the TTDF's ability to sustain disaster relief operations on a nation-wide scale.

The TTDF has not carried out any major chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) exercise, despite the likelihood of a major chemical incident happening at some point in the future, given the growth of industry in Trinidad. While the chemical incident response unit of the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service does carry out occasional exercises to deal with chemical accidents, these do not involve the participation of the TTDF and appear to be limited to preparing for minor incidents. As far as is known, the TTDF has acquired no specialised equipment for CBRN operations; even for CSSR operations, it has not demonstrated any capability to deploy life-detection equipment or use sniffer dogs in that role.

Given the twin-island nature of the country, the TTDFs air transport capabilities would appear to be inadequate in the event of a disaster in Tobago requiring major assistance from Trinidad. This would necessitate commandeering civil air transport to augment airlift efforts, which may not always be feasible. In any case, it is highly debatable whether contingency plans and operating procedures have been adequately prepared.

On the other hand, unlike many armed forces, the TTDF has allocated a very high priority to disaster management and relief. Its justifiable pride in its role in Grenada

has led it to assume a leadership role among the defence forces of the Caribbean as far as disaster management is concerned. With more resources and greater government attention, it can play a very positive role in the years to come.

### **Lessons for India**

The experience of Trinidad and Tobago has a number of lessons for India, despite the vast disparity in the size and capabilities of the two nations. It cannot be denied that while India undoubtedly experiences many more, and far more catastrophic, disasters, it is also much better prepared.

It has to be accepted that the TTDF has far fewer military commitments than the Indian armed forces and, as such, it is easier for it to accord a higher priority to disaster management. Nevertheless, there are a number of lessons that India might find useful to consider. It is probable that India has long since imbibed these lessons, but this does not lessen their value or the need for repetition:

1. The defence forces have to be fully integrated into disaster management plans—ad hoc measures must be avoided.
2. Priority must be given to joint exercises with civilian disaster management agencies and first response units such as the fire and rescue services.
3. Engineering units of the Indian armed forces must be trained and equipped to field CSSR teams, possibly in a CBRN environment.
4. Mobility and air support have to be integrated into any disaster response operation.
5. Response time is vital as military assets may be the best equipped first response forces to arrive on the scene.
6. Local authorities and designated bodies cannot be expected to play their part in disaster management unless training and equipment is provided on an adequate scale.

7. Local authorities and agencies must be able to provide the necessary first response for disasters, major and minor.
8. Plans and schemes that exist on paper are of no value unless regular rehearsals are held, and the results critically analysed.

## Conclusion

The devastation wrought by earthquakes and the accompanying tsunami in Haiti and Japan has served to jolt Trinidad and Tobago's disaster management agencies out of their self-imposed stupor. A direct consequence of this has been the increasing role of the TTDF in disaster management.

It is an unfortunate fact, however, that Trinidad's efforts in this direction have led to a plethora of plans on paper without a commensurate increase in the ability to deal with contingencies. The management and mitigation of minor flooding is completely beyond the ability of the designated agencies, and the TTDF finds itself deployed as an instrument of first response rather than last resort.

Trinidad and Tobago urgently needs to shift its concept of disaster management from that of paper plans, policies, and programmes to a meaningful and sustained capacity building via the provision of both equipment and training.

The TTDF has initiated steps to enhance its ability to contribute effectively in disaster relief operations, but remains hamstrung by the lack of equipment and lack of the requisite infrastructure to allow for timely intervention.

As the TTDF seeks to improve its capabilities in this field, it has sought assistance from neighbouring countries and has participated in joint exercises. However, it is necessary to move beyond the region for seeking assistance and expertise, and it is in this aspect that there is an opportunity for India and Trinidad to enter into a meaningful cooperation. The TTDF has much to learn from the experience of the Indian armed forces in disaster management in extreme conditions, and it is hoped that the governments of both countries will take the necessary steps to enable this to take place.



Notes:

1. ODPM Newsletter *Situation Report*, Vol.1 Issue 1, September 2010, p. 2.
2. Review of National Response Framework, December 2010, Government of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain, p. 2.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
5. The author was informed by a former Alderman of one Municipal Corporation, who was part of a Disaster Management Unit, that there was nothing they could do but go around in a van and talk to people as they had neither equipment nor resources to do more.
6. Review of National Response Framework, n. 2, pp. 9–10.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
8. Neidi Lee-Sing Rojas, "Let's Take a Look Again at...Ivan-The Terrible" *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, September 19, 2004, available at <http://www.newsday.co.tt/news/0,21860.html>, accessed on January 27 2012.
9. *Loc. cit.*
10. "The Manning Strategic Initiative", Editorial, *Stabroek News*, April 25, 2007, available at <http://www.landofsixpeoples.com/news702/ns070425.html> accessed on January 27 2012.
11. See "Tonnes of Food and Water for Grenada", available at <http://www.ttgapers.com/News/2004/9/13/tonnes-of-food-and-water-for-grenada/>, accessed on January 27 2012.
12. While there are many plans on paper, the schemes to prevent flooding and to strengthen vulnerable buildings remain unimplemented. This is partly due to public apathy and partly due to government indifference.
13. This was revealed to the author by a senior TTR officer.
14. The details are available on the following website of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, available at <http://www.odpm.gov.tt/Exercises>.