

Responding to Natural Disasters: What Role for the OSCE?

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On May 19, 2011, a workshop on the potential role for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in natural disaster relief was held at the International Peace Institute's (IPI) Vienna office. Participants included representatives of the OSCE's participating states, executive structures, and parliamentary assembly, as well as experts from other relevant international organizations. Discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule of nonattribution.

This meeting note was drafted by Stephanie Liechtenstein, a consultant at IPI's Vienna office, with support from Walter Kemp, Director for Europe and Central Asia at IPI. It reflects the rapporteur's interpretation of the themes that emerged during the discussion and does not necessarily reflect the views of IPI or the participants in the meeting.

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Background

The dimensions, frequency, and complexity of natural disasters are increasing. No country is immune from this trend. Countries within the OSCE area, for example, have recently been hit by floods, tropical storms, and forest fires. Japan, an official OSCE "partner for cooperation," has been devastated by an earthquake and tsunami, and Australia, another partner for cooperation, has been hit by heavy flooding. In other parts of the world, OSCE states have contributed to relief efforts in Haiti, Pakistan, and South East Asia, for example. Indeed, OSCE participating states are some of the biggest donors to humanitarian aid and the biggest providers of military and civil defense assets (MCDA) for disaster relief.

Recent experience shows the need for strengthening local, national, regional, and international capacities for preparedness and response to natural disasters. Significant challenges to improving response effectiveness include further developing regional and sub-regional mechanisms to assist neighbors in helping neighbors, especially in the use of foreign military and civil defense assets.

Is there a role for the OSCE? The purpose of an IPI workshop held in Vienna on May 19, 2011, was to look at what possible added value the OSCE (as a regional arrangement of the UN) could play in disaster relief, reflecting on existing commitments and experience, and taking into account the experience and mandates of other relevant actors in the OSCE area. The workshop was held on the eve of the V to V Ambassadorial Meeting on Natural Disasters.¹ After providing a background on collective responses to natural and man-made disasters within the OSCE, this meeting report reflects the discussions during the workshop.

Collective Responses to Natural and Man-Made Disasters

Natural disaster relief has so far received limited attention within the OSCE, although there are a number of commitments that relate to the need for working together to promote security and cooperation in relation to environmental challenges.

¹ The V to V Ambassadorial Meeting on Challenges Posed by Natural and Man-Made Disasters and the Coordinated Response of the International Community was part of the so-called Vienna to Vilnius (V to V) Dialogue initiated by the Lithuanian OSCE chairmanship. It was convened to bring together all fifty-six OSCE participating states as well as international experts to take stock of multilateral agreements, instruments, and good practices in disaster prevention, and to discuss a possible role for the OSCE.

For example, the Helsinki Final Act (1975) calls for harmonization of policies in relation to the environment. At a meeting on the protection of the environment in Sofia in 1989, participating states recognized the importance of establishing regional or subregional mechanisms for response, assistance, and exchange of information in environmental emergencies. The focus was mostly on dealing with industrial accidents.

At the Helsinki Summit in 1992, participating states encouraged the creation of national environmental arrangements, such as task forces, which could coordinate the dissemination of relevant information on expertise and equipment to countries facing emergencies, to the United Nations Centre on Urgent Environmental Assistance, and to other relevant international organizations. They also suggested that the latter center should consider having a CSCE liaison officer and should be connected to the CSCE communications network.²

At the Lisbon Summit in 1996 it was agreed that “interaction with regional, subregional, and transborder cooperative initiatives in the economic and environmental field should be enhanced, as they contribute to the promotion of good neighborly relations and security.”³

At the 1999 Istanbul Summit it was suggested to use the OSCE as a platform for cooperative security, including on economic and environmental issues. That said, the caveat was added that this will be done “in ways that neither duplicate existing work nor replace efforts that can be more efficiently undertaken by other organizations.”⁴

It is worth noting that in the Istanbul Summit Declaration, which took place soon after a 7.6 magnitude earthquake in Turkey, OSCE leaders said that “we need to strengthen the international community’s ability to respond to such events, by improving the coordination of the efforts of participating states, international organizations, and NGOs.”⁵ The Permanent Council was tasked with discussing the matter further.

The OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension, adopted at the

Maastricht Ministerial Council in 2003, expressed growing concern about threats to the environment and noted that “ecological disasters resulting from natural causes, economic activities or terrorist acts may pose a serious threat to stability and security.” The strategy said that “environmental threats, including risks of natural and manmade disasters, should be identified in a timely fashion and tackled by common efforts of participating states.”⁶

The issue has also been raised in the context of border management. The Border Security and Management Concept (from Ljubljana in December 2005) underlines the need for the facilitation of cross-border cooperation in case of natural disasters or serious accidents in border zones.

The Madrid Declaration on Environment and Security from 2007 highlights the importance of enhancing cooperation in the area of environment and security in the OSCE region. It notes that environmental degradation, including both natural and man-made disasters, and their possible impact on migratory pressures, could be an additional contributor to conflict. It says that environmental cooperation and the promotion of early warning could be useful tools in diminishing tensions as part of a broader effort to prevent conflict, build mutual confidence, and promote neighborly relations.

There have also been attempts (like the Chairmanship Conference held in Bucharest in 2009) to look at the security implications of climate change.

In the Corfu Process (initiated in 2009), a number of proposals were put forward to strengthen the environmental aspects of the OSCE’s work in relation to early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict rehabilitation.

In the draft Framework for Action in Astana (December 2010), there was a call to intensify dialogue, exchange best practices, and step up efforts to enhance protection of the environment, including by fostering cooperation on collective

2 The Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) preceded the OSCE.

3 Lisbon Summit Declaration (DOC.S/1/96, 3 December 1996), available at www.osce.org/mc/39539.

4 Charter for European Security (PCOEW389, January 2000/corr.), available at www.osce.org/mc/39569.

5 Istanbul Summit Declaration (PCOEW389, January 2000/corr.), available at www.osce.org/mc/39569.

6 OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension (MC(11).JOUR/2, 2 December 2003, Annex1), available at www.osce.org/eea/20705.

responses to natural and man-made disasters. There was also a call to enhance the early warning and analytical capabilities of the OSCE to respond to economic and environmental threats to security by, *inter alia*, fully employing the tools within its mandate in order to build mutual confidence and promote neighborly relations.

The Astana Commemorative Declaration says that “mutually beneficial cooperation aimed at addressing the impact on our region’s security of economic and environmental challenges must be further developed.”⁷

In short, there are a number of relevant OSCE commitments (albeit not very detailed) that relate to fostering cooperation on disaster preparedness and response.

Furthermore, the issue cuts across all three dimensions of the OSCE’s work: the military dimension, the human dimension, and the economic/environmental dimension. And the organization has carried out capacity building to strengthen preparedness and response. So there is already a basis for collective responses to natural and man-made disasters within the OSCE.

Using Military Assets for Disaster Relief

The first panel at the IPI workshop examined global perspectives in using MCDA for disaster relief.

The first speaker pointed out that in the last twenty years large scale natural disasters have become more frequent and severe. He stressed that in the early stages of a major disaster, the needs of the suffering people almost always exceed the capacity to respond. Therefore, steps have to be taken to close this “humanitarian gap” and to improve preparedness. In this context, the importance of the coordinating role of UN OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) was underlined and the usefulness of the 1994 Oslo Guidelines on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief⁸ was emphasized.

However, practical experience has shown that

these instruments have been applied inconsistently and that coordination as well as the integration of military assets in the international response system have to be improved. The importance of “marrying” the civilian and military communities was underlined. In this context, the so-called HOPEFOR initiative by the government of Qatar was mentioned, which aims to improve the use of military assets in relief operations to strengthen the humanitarian response in the immediate post-disaster period.

The main problems in disaster relief operations were cited, including insufficient assessment of relief needs, lack of absorption capability of the affected country, and not enough training for civil-military coordination officers. A number of specific points were raised that could be addressed by the OSCE as a regional arrangement of the United Nations. It was suggested that the OSCE could do the following:

- Assessment of existing regional and sub-regional agreements and standing operational procedures in the OSCE area, with a view to avoiding duplication.
- Assessment of national preparedness for absorbing foreign military assistance, including civil-military coordinating structures and model status of forces agreements.
- Initiation of and support to cross-cultural training of humanitarian and military actors, based on the United Nations humanitarian principles and guidelines.
- Establishment of a formal platform consisting of civilian and military practitioners and disaster responders for information exchange.
- Initiation of research studies of best practices in the OSCE region and lessons learned from past operations.

Explaining the overall coordinating role of UN OCHA in disaster relief, another speaker pointed to the fact that OCHA ensures that there is a framework within which each actor can contribute to the overall response effort. During disaster relief operations, OCHA may activate all or just selected “clusters” to assist specific countries. Clusters may

⁷ Astana Commemorative Declaration Towards a Security Community (SUM.DOC/1/10, 3 December 2010), available at www.osce.org/mc/73962.

⁸ The Oslo Guidelines were originally prepared over a period of two years beginning in 1992. They were the result of a collaborative effort that culminated in an international conference in Oslo, Norway, in January 1994 and were released in May 1994. The Guidelines were updated and revised in 2007.

include “service provision” (e.g., logistics, emergency telecommunications) or “relief and assistance” (e.g., nutrition, health, emergency shelter).

It was stressed that there is a difference between so-called complex emergencies (e.g., conflict situations) and natural disasters. In the latter, the use of military assets is more accepted than in the former. In addition, it was noted that the use of MCDA in disaster relief must be needs-based and should be provided in response to specific requests (with the consent of the affected state). MCDA should be complementary to, but not replace, the existing relief mechanisms. Coordination and keeping an effective dialogue among all international players is of vital importance.

Assets and Experience in Europe

The second panel focused on European organizations involved in disaster relief. Chief among them are NATO’s Euro Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) and the European Union’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO). Unfortunately a representative from ECHO was not able to attend.

The EADRCC was created in 1998 by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC).⁹ It is a focal point for coordinating disaster relief efforts among NATO and partner nations. Since NATO was not originally created as a disaster response organization, work is done in close cooperation with other international organizations, especially UN OCHA. The EADRCC’s main contribution lies in mobilizing resources for disaster operations. In addition, every year, a major disaster response exercise is organized by EADRCC in order to simulate a disaster situation.

Among the issues raised in the discussion session was how the OSCE could plug into the existing relief efforts and what added value it could bring. Overall, most participants expressed reservations as to the possibility of expanding the role of the OSCE in natural disaster relief. It was, however, suggested that NATO’s EADRCC could establish contacts with OSCE field operations, for example in Central

Asia, and include them in their annual disaster response exercises. Furthermore, the OSCE’s comprehensive and cross-dimensional approach was highlighted as an asset and it was pointed out that this could provide added value.

National Experience: The Case of Russia

In order to get a better sense of national disaster response capacities within a major OSCE country, the second panel also focused on the work of the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations (EMERCOM).

High temperatures and storms together with an abnormally long presence of an anticyclone led to massive forest fires in Russia in the summer of 2010. In total, Russia deployed 166,120 responders, 133,000 of whom came from EMERCOM. As a result, half a million people were rescued and 4,600 villages were saved. Three EMERCOM firemen perished in the operation.

In order to effectively coordinate the disaster response, a federal operational center, based at the National Crisis Management Center in Moscow, was established. This center took over the overall coordination and operational management of the disaster and communicated with the 535 teams on the ground as well as with the forty regional operational centers. Exchange of information among them as well as with centers in neighboring countries proved to be especially important and useful.

High-technology equipment was needed to fight the disaster, with 300 to 400 forest fires breaking out every day. The use of aircraft discharging water in order to extinguish forest fires proved to be particularly effective. It was also noted that monitoring the spread of fires with the help of satellites as well as mobile ground and air reconnaissance groups was of particular importance. To help affected people, temporary living facilities were established and psychological support was offered.

The large scale of the disaster prompted Russian authorities to declare a state of emergency in parts

⁹ The issue of disaster relief assistance was first discussed within NATO in the early 1950s, after the Netherlands had been hit by serious floods. Consequently, the principle of solidarity was extended to assisting each other in the case of natural disasters.

of Russia in August 2010. The scale of the fire and the number of foreign offers of assistance led the Federal Operational Center to accept foreign assistance on a case by case basis, mainly involving high-technology equipment. Arriving international relief teams could pass border checkpoints and customs in a simplified way and they were integrated into local emergency management systems, under the overall coordination of EMERCOM. Furthermore, information was shared on a regular basis with UN OCHA, the European Commission's Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC), the EADRCC of NATO, as well as the International Civil Defense Organization (ICDO).

EMERCOM is currently implementing the state fire service re-equipment program for 2011-2013, which involves the recovery of lost and damaged equipment and the procurement of new fire-fighting equipment.

In the discussion, Russia's experience, particularly in cooperating with other countries, was highlighted.

The OSCE Experience

The third panel examined OSCE commitments, experience, and activities in the area of natural disaster relief. While reflecting on existing OSCE commitments in this area, one speaker observed that these commitments "address OSCE participating states and encourage them to cooperate on this challenge without containing any specific tasking for OSCE executive structures." In other words, the focus is on OSCE states rather than the organization's structures.

He went on to explain the activities of the coordinator of OSCE economic and environmental activities (OCEEA) in the area of natural disaster relief and said that the focus is on "building confidence and defusing tensions." The activities have so far been confined to the area of fire management. The following examples were cited:

- In 2006 and 2008, the OCEEA conducted environmental emergency assessments to fire-affected territories in the South Caucasus region. Building on this experience, a regional capacity-building project on fire management in

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the framework of the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC)¹⁰ is currently being implemented. The goal of this project is to reduce the wildfire risks in the South Caucasus by improving capacity. This includes support in formulating national forest fire management policies and implementation strategies.

- A regional seminar on wildfires was held in 2010 in Antalya, Turkey, where fire fighting agencies from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia trained together with counterparts from South Eastern Europe. This project featured fire hazard assessments at the national level, trainings for fire fighters, and assistance in drafting forest fire management policies.

Even where regional cooperation is limited, states have been able to come together to respond to natural disasters. Experience from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Southeastern Europe was cited. The OSCE can be a catalyst and facilitator in this process.

For example, in cooperation with the OSCE field operations in Montenegro and Serbia, the OCEEA is supporting the convening of a Ministerial Forum on Environment and Security for the Balkans under the framework of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) to which the Regional Cooperation Council acts as a secretariat. This forum will address, inter alia, natural disasters and their environmental, economic, and social consequences. The aim is to hold the forum's first meeting later this year.

While stressing that the role of the OSCE in disaster relief should complement existing efforts of the UN, EU, and NATO, one speaker suggested that the OSCE could "take up a role in regional and sub-regional coordination, as envisioned by the Helsinki Document, or in the facilitation of cross-border cooperation, as envisioned in the OSCE Border Security and Management Concept." In order to get engaged even further, the OSCE would, however, have to increase its capacities and resources.

In the ensuing discussion, most of the views expressed underlined the importance of being

¹⁰ ENVSEC works to assess and address environmental problems, which threaten security and stability within and across national borders. The Initiative includes OSCE, UNDP, UNEP, NATO, UNECE, and REC.

prepared and having an effective response. Most participants were of the opinion that the role of the OSCE in this field should not be expanded but that the organization should focus on its core mandate of confidence building instead.

In this context, it was suggested that the OSCE could develop a formal platform consisting of civilian and military practitioners for the purpose of exchanging experiences, best practices, and information. Learning from each other through such a platform could be seen as a tool for confidence building in the wider perspective.

One participant underlined the difference between natural and man-made disasters (e.g., nuclear or oil explosions) and said that the community should try to have “complete and full control,” especially over the latter. It was suggested that for both natural and man-made disasters, common principles should be developed and preparedness should be verified through stress testing.

Conclusion: Prepared Networks

While underlining the overall coordinating role of UN OCHA, the importance of local and regional support was highlighted. “The UN can’t do

everything,” said one participant. Indeed, it was observed that local and regional emergency response capacity was vital for dealing with national emergencies and for contributing to international relief efforts.

The importance of marrying civilian and military cultures was highlighted. Personal networks between the civilian and military structures were seen as very useful and it was stressed that the interface between the two needed to be developed further. It was pointed out that the OSCE has done this successfully in other fields and could bring its cooperative and comprehensive approach to disaster relief as well. “Networking among practitioners and among the relevant organizations is vital,” said one participant. “When a rapid-onset emergency strikes, it is easier to deploy quickly if you know and trust the person on the other end of the phone.”

It was concluded that preparedness is a prerequisite for the implementation of an effective response to natural disasters and that the OSCE, through its mandate for confidence building and its comprehensive and cross-dimensional approach, could bring added value to the international community’s efforts.

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