The ADF in Indonesia: Lessons from Operation Padang Assist

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Key Points

- The ADF’s support to Indonesian authorities during Operation Padang Assist was an important confidence-building measure in strengthening relations between Australia and Indonesia.
- Modern disaster relief interventions require extensive inter-force military co-operation, including collaboration with non-military civilian agencies and foreign governments.
- The success of ADF participation and performance in regional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations are dependent on access to airlift, sealift and amphibious capabilities.
- Effective logistics are the foundation of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief responses. Establishing logistics support arrangements and developing legal frameworks for deployed forces, including latent diplomatic clearances, will make any response more effective.

Summary

In September 2009, the ADF launched Operation Padang Assist in response to the massive earthquake that devastated the north-western Indonesian archipelago. Reflecting on the mission, Brigadier Mark Brewer, the senior Australian Army official who led the ADF contingent, told Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe about the ADF’s mission objectives and the scale of the disaster relief challenge, the specific challenges in jointly operating in an overseas disaster relief setting, the ADF’s overall achievements and contribution to the operation and the impact of the mission on Australia-Indonesia relations.
Commentary

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Q: Describe the ADF’s mission objectives and the scale of the disaster relief challenge at Padang. How appropriate was the composition of the ADF task force that was dispatched?

Brigadier Mark Brewer: The magnitude 7.8 earthquake off the coast of Sumatra on 30 September 2009 caused widespread damage to infrastructure in the Padang region. Padang is a city of nearly a million people. Many buildings were damaged and the water reticulation system was not operating in many parts of the city. Immediate requirements were for the stability of buildings, particularly government buildings to be assessed to enable government services to recommence.

Medical support was needed to assist with injuries sustained in the disaster, but also to supplement overstretched medical infrastructure. Following the immediate emergency requirements, debris needed to be cleared to allow reconstruction efforts to begin.

Australia deployed Joint Task Force (JTF) 629, comprising approximately 550 personnel, to the disaster area as part of a Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)/AusAID led Whole-of-Government operation, to support the Government of Indonesia’s emergency response activities. The ADF contribution sought, where possible, to compliment AusAID efforts so the emergency response would meet Government of Indonesia priorities.

The JTF 629 deployment occurred in three distinct phases. The initial response had a small command and control and communications element from the Australian Army’s 1st Brigade. Medical support in the form of an assessment team from the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and the Army’s 1st Health Support Battalion were also part of the initial deployment. The initial response also saw the establishment of a water purification capability with two Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Units (ROWPUs) being sent.

These capabilities were chosen by Headquarters Joint Operations Command based on their initial assessment of what would likely be required. This was also advised by preliminary feedback from Indonesia-based AusAID, Defence and DFAT staff deployed to Padang to liaise with their Indonesian counterparts, and efforts by the JTF 629 command and control element to shape the ADF response to Indonesian needs. As the initial command and control element established itself into the Government of Indonesia network in Padang, some refinements to our capabilities could occur thereafter.

The next phase was when the JTF main headquarters arrived six days later. This was timely, as the very light command and control element that had deployed were, at that point, stretched trying to cover the range and frequency of interactions with Australian Whole-of-Government and Indonesian Government agencies. By that stage, the initial emergency response was tailing off with many international civilian agencies looking to return home. Water purification, rapid engineer safety assessments on dozens of buildings and primary health care support in a remote area north of Padang were all operating effectively.

The arrival of the 1st Combat Engineering Regiment enabled debris clearance to be conducted. This allowed a school to recommence classes, for irrigation channels to be cleared and the resumption of agricultural activities in an area which had been devastated by landslides during the earthquake. The engineers also constructed a medical clinic in the village where the primary health care team had been operating.
Finally, a bridge damaged as a result of the earthquake was reinforced, allowing heavy traffic to deliver goods to a key market centre in the countryside north of Padang. HMAS Kanimbla allowed us to conduct a beach-landing of engineer equipment in an area relatively close to the work sites. The great value of an amphibious capability for this type of operation was clear to see.

While not under the JTF’s command, an RAAF air element worked to deliver aid and logistics stores throughout the month-long operation, filling an important air lift requirement for the Indonesians.

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Q: Given that the ADF task force was primarily made up of RAN, RAAF and Australian Army elements, what were the specific challenges in jointly operating in an overseas disaster relief setting?

Brigadier Mark Brewer: The force elements involved in Operation Padang Assist deployed at very short notice. Short-notice deployments involve unique challenges because they inevitably bring together ad-hoc groupings. Fortunately, the ADF is operationally well experienced – that means a great deal when you need to get things done at urgently. But, in addition to operational experience, activities such as Exercise Talisman Sabre are critical to refine JTF command experience and processes. Ongoing operational and joint training experience means the ADF enjoys a high level of mutual confidence between the services. We think and operate jointly. All parts of the force approach operational challenges comprehensively.

For Operation Padang Assist, it was essential that the JTF 629 Headquarters establish itself and be effective within 24 hours. The advance JTF 629 command and control node and the JTF 629 main headquarters came from Headquarters 1st Brigade, and Headquarters 1st Division, respectively. While key staff had recent operational experience, these two headquarters were also well used to operating together, having exercised together in command post exercises earlier in 2009. The JTF exploited this important working relationship.

That familiarity made building a JTF Headquarters which integrated the deployed staff, simple and effective. The staff that Headquarters 1st Division deployed, had earlier in 2009, completed a command post exercise and also Exercise Talisman Sabre. The challenges of deploying into an overseas disaster relief setting are greatly reduced by regular exercises as a JTF headquarters.

The JTF was a widely dispersed force operating in difficult conditions. There was a careful balance to strike logistically. Typically, points of entry are overwhelmed with the delivery of relief supplies and equipment in a disaster response. The road infrastructure will normally be damaged. The Padang/Pariaman area was not well suited to heavy vehicles. It was essential to establish as light a footprint as possible. JTF operations were very austere and the majority of our logistics support was sourced through contracts.

AusAID was a critical enabler for the JTF, given their excellent contacts in Indonesia. Logistics staff at the JTF Headquarters and logistics support team from the 1st Combat Support Sustainment Battalion worked superbly within these difficult parameters. The length of the operation meant HMAS Kanimbla, a key logistics node, did
not need to figure into a force rotation/welfare cycle. It was a key asset to have off-shore for medical and logistics purposes.

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**Q:** Given that the Australian complement integrated non-military elements such as AusAID and a Queensland Government search and rescue team, tell us about the intricacies of co-ordinating and working alongside agencies that are outside of the ADF?

**Brigadier Mark Brewer:** Co-ordination across the Whole-of-Government effort was a professional, straightforward and effective process. AusAID and ADF cooperation in particular was a highlight of the operation. The JTF’s scope of work was developed in a series of inter-agency planning sessions to identify, scope, define and design options for the response.

AusAID, DFAT and ADF personnel planned with a clear understanding of the priorities of the Government of Indonesia. This was critical to ensure the emergency response provided by Australia was targeted and could achieve a lasting effect through AusAID’s long-term involvement. From my arrival, DFAT embassy staff in Jakarta, AusAID and the Department of Defence, were key partners and critical enablers for JTF operations. We met daily and coordinated all activities as a team. The ADF contribution could not have achieved what it did without AusAID’s effective coordination.

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**Q:** Illustrate the ADF’s achievements and overall contribution to the Padang operation. To what extent were the mission’s original objectives met?

**Brigadier Mark Brewer:** Operation Padang Assist made a positive contribution to a damaged city and region. The primary health care team treated more that 1,300 people in a remote area of Padang/Pariaman, the ROWPUs produced almost 1.5 million litres of drinking water in an area where there was no water reticulation operating and the engineer assessment team conducted 63 rapid assessments of major public buildings.

The Engineer Support Team built a local health clinic in Seigerringing and completed a number of clearance and construction projects around Tandikat. Both Seigerringing and Tandikat are in the countryside inland from Padang/Pariaman and were the hardest hit by the earthquake. In addition, the engineer support team cleared a major irrigation canal, cleared debris from two local schools and repaired a bridge. The logistic support team operated in a challenging environment coordinating logistic support for a widely dispersed force.

**HMAS Kanimbla** provided a variety of support functions to the JTF including the landing and re-embarkation of the JTF’s 30 vehicles, essential rotary wing and high level medical support and shore work parties to reinforce the engineer support team’s operations. All elements of the JTF worked side by side with their Indonesian counterparts across a wide range of Indonesian Government Agencies.
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Q: How would you rate the importance of the ADF mission in Padang in the overall process of strengthening relations between Australia and Indonesia after East Timor?

Brigadier Mark Brewer: It is important to take the long view on our relationship with Indonesia. In 1947, Australia sent four Army Officers as part of the first ever UN peacekeeping mission and, in 1954, the first Australian Defence Attache to Indonesia was posted. There have been a number of challenges since then, but the relationship endures, and today has reached unprecedented levels.

Positive relations are important to both nations. That is why Australia and Indonesia signed the ‘Agreement between the Republic of Indonesia and Australia on the Framework for Security Cooperation’, better known as the ‘Lombok Treaty’ in 2006; and in 2009, the ADF and the TNI, which are the Indonesian armed forces, signed the ‘Joint Statement between TNI and ADF on Defence Cooperation’.

The ADF has been engaging effectively with the TNI for many years. We share common security interests and a commitment to practical military engagement. Operations such as Padang Assist are important in that they demonstrate one nation's commitment to the other's welfare, and also demonstrate that we mean what we say about working together on shared challenges.

The ADF and TNI operated together in new ways during Operation Padang Assist worked side by side throughout the mission. Furthermore, the opportunity for thousands of Indonesian people to interact with ADF personnel. The interaction took place on the beach where the ROWPUs were providing drinking water from the Indian Ocean; at the beachhead where the engineer task force disembarked; clearing debris in schools, all of which provided unique opportunities for Australian military personnel. In that regard, Operation Padang Assist built on the great work done in 2005 during Operation Sumatra Assist and further reinforced the exceptional work done by AusAID.

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Q: What were the ADF’s main takeaway lessons from the operation? How might they be applicable in future ADF disaster relief missions?

Brigadier Mark Brewer: Every disaster is different, its impact on the nation will be unique and the best responses will not be known until the disaster can be assessed. Time spent, even for a few hours, to grasp the most appropriate form of response is important. A considered and accurate response will be undercut by a rush just to do something quickly. The risk inherent in rushing is that you will make life more difficult for those you intend to help. Being first on the ground is not as important as being the most effective.

Interagency integration worked, as did linking the emergency response with a longer term programme to reinforce the benefits provided by the various activities we conducted. That will not always be possible, but where it is, such an approach is worthwhile.

Effective logistics are the foundation for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief responses. Work done to establish logistics support arrangements and to develop legal
frameworks for deployed forces, even latent diplomatic clearances, will make any response more effective.

The deployment of formed and practised headquarters as the core of the Joint Task Force mitigated much of the command and control risk and allowed a rapidly formed force to be integrated quickly. The ADF's training activities, such as Exercise Talisman Sabre, enabled Joint Task Force Headquarters and elements from across the ADF to prepare for a wide range of operations and to respond quickly and effectively when necessary.

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