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Flying Kites: Australia's Response to Regional Disasters

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to attend and contribute to this important discussion. I have been asked to comment on Australia's response to regional disasters, and I will do so by referring to Australia's recent responses to the dreadful 2004 tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia, and to the 2006 crisis in the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (perhaps more commonly known as East Timor). Along the way, I want to fly a few kites for you to consider.

Disclaimer

My **first kite** is by way of an important disclaimer: namely, that the views expressed are mine and do not necessarily represent those of the Australian Government or other Australian-based NGOs. However, as a former senior military officer who was intimately involved in Australia's 'whole-of-government' response to the Timor crisis in 1999-2000, and now as CEO of an Australian aid agency that has been involved in both the Aceh and Timor-Leste crises, perhaps my views are worth considering.

Austcare and its Relationship with OCHA

Firstly, a few words about Austcare: we are an independent Australian aid and development non-government organisation (NGO), specialising in improving human security through poverty reduction, with particular focus on security, development and governance. Austcare assists the most excluded and vulnerable: people affected by natural and man-made disasters, those displaced and requiring protection, and those impacted by the legacy of landmines and explosive remnants of war. Austcare enables communities to move themselves from poverty through sustainable livelihood programs. A non-sectarian and a not-for-profit agency, Austcare has worked in more than 30 countries since 1967. Currently, Austcare is managing 30 projects in 11 countries. We are fully accredited by the Australian Government's Agency for International Development (AusAID), and are one of six Australian-based NGOs on AusAID's stand-by arrangements for disaster management and emergency response. Austcare is also a member of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). For more information refer to our website at <http://www.austcare.org.au>.

Austcare is in partnership with OCHA for the provision of civilian Protection Officers. To this end we have been involved in OCHA's ProCap training, and we have welcomed the opportunity to participate in OCHA's training on civil-military coordination. More importantly, however, Austcare strongly supports OCHA's critical

role in coordinating humanitarian action and in relieving and preventing suffering from natural disasters and in conflict-related emergencies. Because of Austcare's work, and my former military background, I am frequently asked to give my views on the subject of civil-military relations, and in so doing I always emphasise OCHA's important role and its excellent publications and guidance. That said, I will speak frankly today, and at times may appear critical of OCHA. I assure you that I do so with the intention of contributing to our mutual understanding, and I hope that I leave here having learned a great deal more than when I arrived.

Strengthening OCHA and Making it More Accountable

Over the past decade there has been improved coordination during emergencies, but I am sure we would all agree that much more needs to be done. So let me fly my **second kite**: namely, that OCHA needs to be strengthened and held more accountable in avoiding and managing the humanitarian chaos that accompanies natural disasters and conflicts. This means that member states should provide more support to OCHA. Quite apart from financial contributions, countries need to consider their own preparation and response mechanisms in conjunction with OCHA's guidelines and practices. As well, within the family of UN humanitarian agencies, greater coordination and cooperation is required. We are yet to see the outcome of the "Cluster Approach", but more work is required to improve emergency preparation and planning between agencies, to avoid competition for scarce resources, to implement comprehensive disaster risk management practices, and to optimize service delivery in a timely manner to those who need it most. It is very apparent that increased civil-military coordination will be required in the future: OCHA has made useful progress in this area, but we have only seen modest achievements to date. In this particular area it will be critical for OCHA to take a leading role in the development of peacekeeping capstone doctrine, currently well-underway by DPKO, and to have this doctrine agreed at IASC and accepted by member states.

OCHA needs to be empowered to achieve more in the civil-military arena to ensure that humanitarian principles are better understood and upheld, including reaching out to governments and NGOs to encourage and facilitate better coordination. I think there is a need for OCHA to train and provide liaison officers to military and police forces to a much greater extent than at present in order to promote understanding and implementation of humanitarian action in accordance with international humanitarian law. Of course, none of this will be possible unless and until OCHA is staffed with the very best people. I therefore challenge the member states – my own included - to insist on this, to offer their very best people to this cause, and to hold OCHA responsible and accountable if it does not perform.

Australia's Priorities

My **third kite** concerns what I believe to be Australia's continuing role and priorities in disaster mitigation and response, relevant to humanitarian action. Fundamentally, Australia is likely to continue to be a key contributor and active participant in humanitarian action. Over the past decade, Australia has become more actively engaged in humanitarian crisis response, and I do not think this situation will change, particularly given the significant increase in the aid budget over the next decade and the increasing willingness of the Australian public to support NGOs with their donations. Although Australia's attention will remain global, the Australian Government, and increasingly more Australian-based NGOs, are likely to continue to

give priority to the Asia-Pacific region. Within the Asia-Pacific, the prime area of concern will continue to be what is known as the 'Arc of Instability' – an area loosely defined, but generally considered to spread from Aceh in north-western Indonesia to New Zealand, incorporating Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and the islands of the southwest Pacific. This region is both a maritime and a continental environment, encompassing a huge area, with people from diverse cultures, and with different political, ethnic and religious backgrounds. This region is prone to significant natural disasters, has high levels of poverty and unemployment, high birth rates, worrying levels of HIV, and is vulnerable to corruption and nepotism.

The arc is unstable in two critical ways, both of which could lead to humanitarian action being required. First, the area is geographically prone to disease and seismic disasters, as evidenced already by a number of pandemics, earthquakes, tsunamis, forest fires, droughts and floods. Global warming, and the consequent rise in sea level, is estimated to cause large numbers of environmental refugees, forcing the relocation of whole communities and even nations. We can anticipate the need for continuing disaster management and emergency response, and greater preparation will be required if these are to be dealt with effectively.

Second, much of the arc remains unstable because of the possibility of failed states, at least partly the fallout from the decolonisation process. According to the respected US NGO, the *Fund for Peace*, a couple of states within the arc already appear prominently in its "failed state index" for 2006. This index is based on a uniform assessment of political, economic and social indicators. Indonesia and Papua New Guinea are listed in the top 50 states, out of a total of 146 countries surveyed globally.¹ Fiji, Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands have not been included in the survey, but could be expected to be of even higher probability as failed states.

The Australian Government continues to develop its 'whole-of-government' approach to deal with humanitarian crises, and particularly those within the arc of instability where Australia, supported by New Zealand, has already taken a leading role in Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands. There have been encouraging developments in the Australian Government's crisis preparation and response, but much more needs to be done – particularly in the areas of planning, preparation, training, and the development of policy and doctrine. To better enable this, Austcare has advocated that Australia establish a centre of excellence – perhaps called the *Regional Institute for Complex Emergencies (RICE)* – which would include forging closer collaboration between government departments and with the UN, regional nations, and relevant NGOs². Recently, the Labor opposition party in Australia has stated its intention to create such a centre should it be elected to government.³

¹ Refer <http://www.fundforpeace.org>, accessed 9 June 2007. Indonesia is listed at 32 and Papua New Guinea at 49.

² Refer Austcare's submission on *Peacekeeping Operations* to the Australian Senate Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, March 2007, <http://www.austcare.org.au> or http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/fadt_ctte/peacekeeping/submissions/sublist.htm.

³ Robert McClelland MP, Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, *The Need for Civil-Military Coordination (Not Just Cooperation) in Disaster & Disease Management*, address to the Australian Homeland Security Research Centre, Canberra, 5 June 2007.

Australian NGOs will continue to play an active and critical role in humanitarian action. Much more work needs to be done, however, to better coordinate NGO activities and to transform Australia's commitment from a 'whole-of-government' to a 'whole-of-nation' approach. The RICE, if established, could play an important role in this regard.

I believe there is important humanitarian research to be done in Australia in the areas of disaster mitigation and emergency response, and particularly in civil-military coordination. I encourage OCHA to consider advocating for and partnering with the Australian Government and an Australian NGO, such as Austcare, to advance this research in the Asia-Pacific region.

Aceh

My **fourth kite** concerns the lessons learned from the humanitarian response to Aceh in the wake of the devastating Boxing Day tsunami in December 2004. We are all familiar with the magnitude of the disaster, with 130,000 casualties in Aceh, enormous displacement, incredible destruction and unimaginable suffering. All of us who were involved will never forget it, and nor should we.

The international response to Aceh was outstanding, and the Indonesian Government must be congratulated for allowing and facilitating the arrival in Aceh - which had been formerly closed due to the protracted conflict - of over 200 NGOs and 3,000 military personnel from 10 countries. Natural disasters that occur in conflict settings present particular problems. The outcome in Aceh has been better than many of us might have predicted, and certainly excellent in comparison to the tragedy that has unfolded in Sri Lanka, where initial hopes had been much higher.

Despite the international commitment and goodwill in supporting relief operations in Aceh, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), in their *World Disasters Report 2005*, highlighted numerous instances where poor communication and coordination resulted in the sub-optimal delivery of humanitarian assistance. I will not repeat the details contained in the IFRC chapter titled "Information Black Hole in Aceh", which is available on their website, and which you have undoubtedly read.⁴ Suffice to say that there were too many examples of duplication, competition, neglect and missed opportunities, for OCHA and participating countries not to have to think seriously of how things might be done better in the future.

Australia's response to the crisis was significant, but it also lacked coordination. Some of you were present in Canberra last year when the Commander of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) contingent, Brigadier David Chalmers, related the highlights of the deployment. There was close synergy between Defence and AusAID, but the ADF's mission statement was simply along the lines of "go and make a difference", and Brigadier Chalmers admitted that he was pretty much making his plans as he went. Flexibility is a virtue, particularly when your contingent is unarmed, but I would be concerned if the ADF would contemplate going to war in the same way - yet the consequences for human security in such humanitarian operations are no less pressing than in war. This confession by Brigadier Chalmers

⁴ Refer <http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2005/chapter4.asp>

confirmed my view that a lot more work needs to be done to plan for and execute these types of missions, and I believe that OCHA can and should play a seminal role in working with national defence and police forces to make this happen.

Coordinated planning by of the NGO community in Australia was no more reassuring than the government's. While information was openly shared in a very collegiate manner, thanks to the good work of ACFID, there was enormous competition between NGOs for the public's dollar, and an inability to undertake joint assessment missions and consider the most effective collaborative response. More work went into reassuring the public that their money had been properly spent than in working together to make a real difference on the ground. Aceh proved, once again, that the NGO community is not geared to collaborative responses. And again, I think OCHA can take a leading role in helping to address this shortcoming.

I thought I would share with you today the perspective of Austcare's Director in Aceh. Nichola Krey arrived in Banda Aceh shortly after the tsunami with a pack on her back, a wad of money and a satellite telephone. Today, Austcare has a \$3 million program in Aceh which seems to be ever-expanding, due to the results we have achieved working with local communities - first in the provision of essential support, and then in more sustainable livelihood programs. I asked Nichola to advise me on the aspects of civil-military coordination that she witnessed at the coalface. This is what she has said:

- "The Australian military were our first port of call to get an accurate report on the security situation and accessibility issues. They also provided us with a timetable for NGO coordination meetings at which they attended and coordinated with the NGO community on logistics, accessibility and security.
- In the first months of the emergency the military played a critical role in clearing the damage and large objects (such as boats and cars), and strategically approaching this so as to ensure humanitarians had accessibility to communities to provide essential services. The use of military heavy equipment and the expediency in which the military can be deployed is extremely useful in times of emergency.
- I am not sure what high level coordination was taking place between the Government of Indonesia and the Australian military, but the international military forces were able to transport the equipment they needed into Indonesia much faster than NGOs could. Much of the NGO equipment and aid assistance sat on the dock for months and months.
- In terms of taking action on the ground, the military were better organised to achieve this than NGOs who tended to attend a lot of meetings and talk amongst themselves.
- There is, however, a counter-argument to this. Clearing plots of land without first having given the community a chance to claim their land, sort through their rubble and claim what was left of their belongings is also a problem - as is not coordinating with the community to allow them to participate in operations. This should be part of the NGO's role to help mobilise the community, and work with the military so that it is an inclusive process. There is nothing worse for the healing of a community than the feeling of helplessness and not being able to do anything. This of course slows down the military response but it is a critical process.
- However, much of the 'clean-up' couldn't really take place until much later, after families had identified their land and found the dead or missing

members of their families. I think that the NGO community had a better understanding of what processes were to take place after the emergency had subsided and were considering this as part of their emergency response. Training of military in awareness-raising of these matters would be extremely useful.

- In terms of medical service delivery the military hospitals excelled, but there seemed to be a lot of them and they were not working to full capacity.
- Given the nature of the emergency I think the military tended to 'get on with the job', and were not willing to wait around whilst NGOs decided what to do about it. Whilst I did not participate in higher level coordination meetings between NGOs and military on security and logistics I am aware it took place - how effective this was I don't know as the result was a very uncoordinated response in general. Whilst a 'can-do' attitude is critical during an emergency, there are many other considerations on top of logistics. There must be a high level of awareness about the fabric of the community, what their own capacity is to address the emergency, and processes to take place after the initial emergency phase. NGOs are still around for this - the military are not. This of course must be coordinated closely with the national government which often slows things down. This may be a little frustrating for the military (and NGOs) who want to get on with the job, but must be considered because the ghosts of the emergency tend to linger during the transition to the reconstruction phase.
- Before the Australian military departed, the Acehnese held a thank you ceremony celebrating their efforts. All reports from the Acehnese community, and from other militaries and NGOs with whom I spoke, were that the ADF's effort during the emergency was highly regarded. They were respected for their humanity towards the community, their excellent behaviour, and their 'can-do' attitude."

While I was very pleased to receive Nichola's report about the ADF – particularly considering my background - I could only think how much better things might have been had pre-deployment joint planning occurred, and had OCHA been more able to broker more effective liaison on the ground. So I wonder how things will go when the next tsunami strikes, as it will?

Timor-Leste

If Aceh provides a success story of sorts, Australia's and the UN's response to the crisis in Timor-Leste in 2006 was, in my view, less effective. This is my **fifth kite**: which I put under the banner of lost opportunities, particularly in the area of civil-military coordination.

The political crisis in which Timor-Leste found itself last year resulted in a breakdown of security and the rule of law, although this was mainly confined to the capital, Dili. A significant humanitarian emergency resulted, with large scale displacement in a young country already suffering from poverty and malnutrition. There is no question that the deployment of the International Security Force (ISF) - led by Australia and including forces from New Zealand, Malaysia and Portugal – did an outstanding job in preventing the destruction of Dili. I was in Timor at the time doing some active peacekeeping of my own, working to save the Austcare office, which is located in one of Dili's worst suburbs for violence. No one was happier than me to see the cavalry arrive (so to speak). It quickly became clear, however, that coordination between

the fractured Timorese Government, the ISF, the local security and police forces (such as they were), and the UN, was less than adequate. It was difficult to get clear information of the situation or to understand who was in control. I am hopeful that OCHA and the ADF will do a thorough analysis of this operation, and that both organisations will be prepared to share their findings.

From my perspective, some of the key lessons are these:

- OCHA has an important role to play in such situations. To be effective, however, OCHA must deploy with sufficient and capable resources, and must be prepared to act more proactively to encourage the establishment of a joint command and operations centre, as part of which a humanitarian operations cell needs to be part. I know that the Timorese interim Prime Minister, Jose Ramos Horta, would have welcomed this. Not wanting to become 'captured' in Timor, and hoping for a quick exit, the ISF did not grasp the opportunity to insist on a coordinated approach. More than a year later they have still been unable to leave and, although coordination has improved, it is far from optimum.
- Differing approaches and a lack of common understanding of humanitarian principles resulted in additional, and at times competing, layers of coordination. On the NGO and UN humanitarian side there was a lack of understanding about the role and mandate of both the ISF and the UN Police. In such situations I think OCHA should be more proactive in insisting that rules of engagement are promulgated, and that a common understanding of humanitarian principles and procedures is established.
- The ADF initially did not deploy with sufficient civil-military capability. When this became apparent they were slow in rectifying this or in significantly changing their approach. OCHA representatives in Dili agreed with me on this issue, yet were unable to convince the ADF to change its strategy, and lacked the resources to offer mechanisms to make this happen.
- The ISF and UN Police were reluctant to become engaged in humanitarian assistance, and this caused resentment by the NGOs and the population. This illustrates the requirement to link the provision of security with effective humanitarian action plans, and for the military and police to be fully engaged in order to provide the humanitarian space necessary for NGOs to operate in safety. Clearly, this was neither properly understood nor effectively implemented. In this critical area, I believe OCHA should take a leading and bridging role. I do not think the role of OCHA in Timor-Leste was ever clear to many of the actors, and probably still isn't.
- The role of police in such situations is critical. In the initial stages there appeared to be little coordination between the ISF and the UN Police, and the ISF became frustrated because they wanted to handover policing tasks and depart.
- Protection of the civilian population was a key issue. It was clear that a great deal of misunderstanding existed on the part of the ISF and UN Police as to their responsibilities, and how protection could be coordinated across the various agencies. As a result of this confusion, security operations were sometimes conducted in the camps without coordination with civil agencies. The result was a deterioration in the level of protection and a worsening of the humanitarian situation, leaving NGOs in a compromising position.
- For its part, the humanitarian community could have played a better role in assisting the ISF and UN Police gain a better understanding of the situation. NGOs had been on the ground for longer and had a much better

understanding of the community dynamics. Ideally, a strengthened civil-military interface would have enabled a more coordinated and holistic approach. To its credit, the humanitarian agencies worked extremely well with the Timor-Leste Government to avert a major humanitarian crisis. There was an opportunity for OCHA to establish a stronger bridge with the ISF and UN Police, but it did not seem sufficiently resourced to do this.

Timor-Leste provides a good case study for how humanitarian action and civil-military coordination could have been done with more purpose. In my discussion with some of the key actors there has been a tendency to justify humanitarian inaction on the basis of playing a supporting role to the Timor-Leste Government. I do not agree with this argument. The Timorese Government had requested international assistance because of its inability to maintain the rule of law. It was also internally divided and perhaps the prime cause of the problem. In such circumstances, coordinated and decisive action was required by the ISF and the UN. In such circumstances the failure of not acting decisively is likely to result in a continuing cycle of instability, and increased likelihood of a failed state occurring.

Strengthening Civil Society

I would like to conclude my remarks by flying my **sixth and final kite**: namely, what do Aceh and Timor-Leste (and countless other similar examples) tell us about how we might help strengthen civil societies, and what role might OCHA play?

If we seek to prevent states and their societies from collapsing, and if we seek to assist emerging states to climb the ladder of liberal democracy to achieve a durable peace, then we must apply a holistic approach. This approach combines security, development and governance in a coordinated manner and in concert with the priorities of the recipients rather than the donors.

We might, therefore, think of state-building in terms of a three-legged stool. If any leg is too underdeveloped the stool will collapse. The security leg provides the safe environment in which development can occur. But security is much broader than traditional concepts of improving government instrumentalities and security forces, as important as these are. Effective security also demands the building of capacity at the grassroots, embracing the essential elements of human security, the rights of people to live in dignity, free from want. Simply put, people need to see an improvement in their lives at the grassroots level.

Governance, which includes the rule of law, is a critical component in strengthening civil society. But governance goes well beyond the architecture of government, and to be effective must permeate to and be developed within all strata of society. The strength of civil society rests not on an elected government, but on the culture and processes that underpin societies. Generally, major donors should give more attention than hitherto to promoting the development of grassroots governance, and should provide greater financial assistance to NGOs and volunteer agencies in this area.

Effective development must be 'quick impact', protracted and sustainable. In states emerging from conflict or natural disaster a continuum is required from emergency assistance to sustainable development.

These three legs must be progressed together, but they also need to be strengthened by the application of human rights and with the allocation of sufficient financial and human resources.



Numerous case studies of developing countries illustrate that better prioritization and coordination between donors and recipients is required. Greater synchronization is required between state and non-state actors. In other words, governments, international organisations like the UN and the World Bank Group, NGOs, and the corporate sector can work more cooperatively to 'make poverty history' and achieve the Millennium Development Goals. This is a model that Austcare advocates and is committed to implement.

Within the UN family this may sound more like the work of the Peacebuilding Commission or UNDP, but I believe that OCHA has an important role to play at the start of the process. One thing is for sure, if the process starts poorly then it will almost certainly end up that way. OCHA is not just about responding to emergencies, but averting them. It is, therefore, in OCHA's interests to ensure that it takes a long-term view to achieve durable solutions and sustainable peace, and that it is not seen to be totally reactive to situations as and when they occur.

Conclusion

In this presentation I have flown a number of kites. Let me summarise briefly:

- First, the views expressed are Austcare's and do not necessarily represent those of the Australian Government or Australian-based NGOs.

- Second, OCHA needs to be better resourced to undertake its critical mandate. Enhanced civil-military coordination with member states will play a large part in this, as will improved cooperation within the UN family, and better coordination with the NGO community.
- Third, Australia will continue to provide humanitarian support globally, but its priority will continue to focus on the Asia-Pacific generally, and the 'arc of instability' in particular.
- Fourth, Australia's humanitarian commitment to the Aceh tsunami was significant and highly regarded. But it also lacked coordination and contributed to what the IFRC has called the 'black hole of information'. OCHA might have done more to improve civil-military coordination.
- Fifth, Australia's humanitarian and security response to the Timor-Leste crisis in 2006 was significant and helped prevent the total collapse of the society. However, it also highlighted lost opportunities and weaknesses in civil-military coordination. OCHA might have done more to avert some of the humanitarian problems that occurred, particularly in relation to civil-military coordination and the role of civilian police.
- Finally, it is paramount that humanitarian action aims to strengthen civil societies in the critical areas of security, development and governance, so that a sustainable peace may exist. OCHA has an important role to play in laying the foundations for this to occur, and in promoting mechanisms that prevent (or at least mitigate against) the horrors of disaster and conflict.

