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BEST PRACTICES FOR CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

A PRIMER FOR FOREIGN MILITARY FORCES



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- Civil-Military Coordination in Foreign Disaster Relief: Best Practices for Affected & Assisting States
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Cover photos:

Photo 1: U.S. Army photo by Civil Affairs Specialist Sgt. Jaron Nigozo, 15 July 2024. A Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Lieutenant and U.S. Navy Lieutenant give a basic lifesaving class to Port Vila Central Hospital staff in Vanuatu in support of Pacific Partnership.¹

Photo 2: U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Hannah Kantner, 1 May 2023. An MH-60S Sea Hawk on-loads cargo during a replenishment-at-sea with the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz.²

Photo 3: Photo by Rachel Landers, Joint Region Marianas, 11 July 2023. Sailors from the U.S. Navy, Republic of Korea Navy, and Japan Maritime Self Defense Force cleared typhoon debris during an international community outreach event while they were on Guam for exercise Pacific Vanguard. Sailors from the Royal Australian Navy also participated.³

Executive Summary

Purpose

The purpose of this pamphlet is to provide a handy guide for understanding the civil-military coordination landscape for disaster management (DM) in and among Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICT). It also suggests pathways for extra-regional militaries to cooperate with each PICT, with regional organizations, and with each other.

Scope

The scope of this pamphlet comprises peacetime DM operations, including foreign disaster response, that may be undertaken by the United States (U.S.) Department of Defense (DoD) or other countries' defense establishments. This pamphlet will not cover conflict situations. It will touch upon disaster response within the U.S. Pacific territories, although operations in these spaces are subject to separate legal and policy frameworks crafted for U.S. domestic operations.

This pamphlet builds upon established DoD doctrine, particularly that provided in Joint Publication (JP) 3-29 on Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA) and JP 3-28 Defense Support of Civil Authorities, and on DoD Directive 5100.46 on Foreign Disaster Relief (FDR). Moreover, it rests on the sovereign choices of the PICTs and agreements to which they are parties, especially Compacts of Free Association (COFA) and the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP). The best practices featured align with that doctrine and those agreements, and they have been illuminated through case studies and interviews with subject matter experts (SME) in civil-military coordination within the region or with experience in past FDR operations.

This pamphlet focuses on cases in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR). It integrates points that may be applicable in other regions.

Organization

The first section of this guide discusses regional organizations with a stake in DM. The second section highlights these organizations' documents, decision-making mechanisms, and operational tools and agencies. The final section provides mini-case studies of disaster events that impacted PICTs. These studies discuss requests for assistance and how support was coordinated.

Key Points

DM in the Pacific Islands relies on solidarity among PICTs and partners. DM capacity remains limited across most PICTs, and this limitation means strong bonds must be built before a hazard event to ensure responses meet needs without overwhelming affected states. Coordination mechanisms tested before an emergency occurs will allow humanitarian, civilian, military, and police responders to deliver a timely and effective response.

PICTs have various venues to coordinate responses and strengthen resilience

- The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent commits PICTs to stronger DM governance, partnerships, and cooperation
- The South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM) has endorsed the establishment of a Regional Military Interoperability Guide for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR)
- The "FRANZ Arrangement" facilitates information exchange among partners during emergencies to ensure best use of Australian, French, and Zealand assets and resources in providing disaster relief to Pacific partners
- U.S.-affiliated PICTs – American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Guam, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and Republic of Palau – can mobilize aspects of their relationship with the U.S. to augment their local disaster response capabilities

Only five PICTs – plus France – maintain standing armed forces

- Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea (PNG), and Tonga can mobilize their armed forces to respond at home or regionally
- The SPDMM-endorsed Pacific Response Group (PRG) is a regional military grouping able to deliver a coordinated military response – as needed – to disasters
- U.S. federal authorities and armed forces coordinate FDR with affected states and multilaterally with regional armed forces
- Police forces are common focal points for DM cooperation throughout the region

The PICTs' governments and people have committed to localization of humanitarian action and are global proponents and practitioners of it

- National governments openly express both the kinds of assistance they need and their preferences for how and by whom it is provided
- Information sharing before, during, and after an event allows PICT responders the best opportunity to respond effectively

Regional Overview

The Pacific Islands region includes more than two dozen states and territories. In addition to larger countries – Australia, New Zealand, and PNG – the area comprises 13 independent, small-island states. There are also seven self-governing territories, each with association to France, New Zealand, or the U.S., as well as three U.S. territories – American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam. The map below shows the Pacific Islands region, as depicted by the PIF Secretariat;⁴ this map does not label the U.S. territories north of FSM (Guam and CNMI) and east of Samoa (American Samoa).



Hazards

Between 1970 and 2024, disasters in the region caused more than 6,000 deaths and affected 28 million people, one-half of the PICTs' population. Disaster events – drought, tropical cyclone, flooding, and volcanic eruption – caused US\$185 billion in damages.⁵ PICTs are exposed to sudden- and slow-onset hazards. Several islands confront geophysical hazards – i.e., earthquake, tsunami, and volcanic eruption. All of them confront hydrometeorological hazards. Finally, anthropogenic hazards – epidemic diseases, pollution, etc. – are present across the region. Hazards interact in complex ways with land, ocean, and atmospheric conditions that, together, increase the potential for coastal erosion, extreme precipitation, extreme heat, and sea level rise.

Organizations and Fora

Best Practice: Engage with regional organizations before a disaster occurs to build understanding and relationships.

The PICTs have organized various networks and venues among themselves and with extra-regional partners. Three of these organizations have key roles in facets of disaster preparedness and response. They are:

Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)

The PIF is the region's foremost political and economic organization. It includes 18 members and 21 dialogue partners. The U.S. is among the dialogue partners.⁶

Pacific Community (SPC)

The SPC is a member-owned scientific and technical development organization. Its 27 members include all 18 PIF members and various non-self-governing territories; the U.S. is a member.⁷ DM-related work includes the Pacific Islands Emergency Management Alliance (PIEMA).

The South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM)

The SPDMM is an annual ministerial-level meeting that includes Australia, Chile, Fiji, France, New Zealand, PNG, and Tonga. Observers are Japan, the United Kingdom (UK), and the U.S. Among SPDMM's efforts to increase effectiveness is Exercise LONGREACH, which emphasizes military-military and civil-military coordination during disaster response. In 2023, the SPDMM endorsed the Military Interoperability Guide for HADR operations,⁸ and in 2024, the SPDMM endorsed the Pacific Response Group (PRG).⁹

Regional Agreements and Mechanisms

Best Practice: Understand regional frameworks to ensure plans for civil-military coordination do not undermine or conflict with standing plans, processes, and expectations.

The PIF's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent is the overarching regional blueprint for sustainable development. Through it, PIF members commit to building resilience to the full scope of natural hazards and reaffirm the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP).¹⁰ Multilateral agreements and bilateral ties offer response options.

Treaties, Declarations, and Documents

Boe Declaration on Regional Security

The PIF issued the Boe Declaration in 2018. It recognized a need for collective action to improve overall human security, and for the first time, it integrated humanitarian assistance and disaster response within the definition of security. Even as it reaffirmed each PIF member's sovereign right to address security challenges without external interference, it also recognized that national security issues interlock with regional security issues and committed member states to collaboratively developing, strengthening, and implementing security strategies and capacities.¹¹

Compacts of Free Association (COFA)

The U.S. maintains bilateral COFAs with each of FSM, Palau, and RMI. These three Freely Associated States (FAS) and the U.S. have specific institutional, financial, and security relationships that affect DM.¹² For example, the U.S. National Weather Service has a presence in RMI to support that country's weather services as they identify, analyze, and communicate information about weather-related hazards.¹³ None of the three FAS maintains a standing military force. The U.S. army maintains a garrison within the RMI, and U.S. forces regularly engage with and exercise in FSM and Palau.¹⁴ The photo at right shows personnel at the U.S. Army Garrison-Kwajalein Atoll (RMI) as they welcome Roi-Namur evacuees on Kwajalein after weather-driven waves destroyed homes and infrastructure on Roi-Namur in 2024.¹⁵



Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP)

The FRDP was developed through collaboration among the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment (SPREP), SPC, and other partners to coordinate and activate disaster risk management. The FRDP is implemented by the Pacific Resilience Partnership (PRP) Taskforce and PRP working groups.¹⁶

Joint Statement on Disaster Relief Cooperation in the South Pacific

The “FRANZ Arrangement” is an agreement among France, Australia, and New Zealand to coordinate regional DM upon request from a PICT. The Arrangement is led by the Foreign Affairs Ministries of the three signatories. FRANZ countries also coordinate with other responders.¹⁷

SPDMM Regional Military Interoperability Guide

The Interoperability Guide supports effective use of foreign military assets during disaster response operations in support of affected PICTs.¹⁸ It lays out standardized procedures for military support to civilian-led disaster response, but use of the Guide is entirely voluntary and subject to the decision-making of the affected state and SPDMM members. Based on the Guide, each SPDMM member has nominated their respective foreign affairs ministry or department as their lead coordinating agency, through which requests for foreign military assistance would be routed, vetted, and coordinated. The Guide is tested annually via a multilateral HADR tabletop exercise (TTX), Regional Exercise LONGREACH, and a regional field training HADR exercise, CROIX DU SUD. Non-SPDMM militaries may refer to the Guide when responding alongside SPDMM members.¹⁹

Strategic Roadmap for Emergency Management (SREM) Framework

Complementary to the SPDMM HADR Interoperability Guide, the PIF's Regional SREM Framework (2021-2025) describes the priority work streams of PIEMA agencies and supports their implementation through national SREMs.²⁰ The objective is to enhance emergency preparedness for effective response in the Pacific through building governance, capacity and capability, and asset coordination. As of 2023, eight PICTs had utilized the regional framework to elaborate national SREMs, and the regional SREM was due for revision in 2025.²¹

Agencies, Missions, Offices, and Tools

Best Practice: Civilian leadership is the general rule for disaster responses, and military operations support civilian agency activities.

In disaster responses, military forces generally operate in support of civilian authorities. Along with other international actors, foreign military forces supplement or complement efforts of affected-state authorities. This approach ensures that military support (if requested) is coordinated, effective, and respectful of both legal strictures and the sovereignty of affected states. It also maintains the civilian control of emergency management and ensures operations meet humanitarian need.

Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA)

When called upon to support U.S. federal authorities in a domestic response, U.S. DoD operations fall under the DSCA mission set. DSCA operations have occurred after major natural disasters in all three Pacific territories.²² Under the U.S. National Response Framework (NRF), DSCA comprises support provided by federal military, DoD civilians or contract personnel, components, or the National Guard “when the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Governors of the affected States [or Territories], elects and requests to use those forces... in response to requests for assistance from civil authorities...”²³ Under

JP 3-28, for DSCA within American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam, the Commander of U.S. INDOPACOM is the supported U.S. DoD combatant commander who will select the command structure and forces to be employed.²⁴

Department of State (DoS, of the U.S.)

On 16 May 2025, the DoS released planning guidance for disasters and humanitarian responses. This guidance noted that the responsibility for new responses will shift in full to the DoS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM). Additionally, this guidance stated that the goals, key characteristics, and types of assistance delivered by the U.S. Government in response to humanitarian emergencies remain unchanged. To activate DoS resources, U.S. Diplomatic Posts must still issue a Declaration of Humanitarian Need (DHN) consistent with current Foreign Affairs Manual guidance.²⁵

Foreign Humanitarian Assistance / Foreign Disaster Relief (by the U.S. Government)

After a disaster event, the Chief of Mission (COM) in the U.S. Embassy in the affected state assesses need, and the COM may issue a DHN.²⁶ With PRM approval based on established criteria for international disaster assistance, up to US\$100,000 can be issued to support the initial response. Additional resources, including DoD support, may be forthcoming based on established humanitarian need, in consultation with the Director of Foreign Assistance, the Office of Global Food Security, the Bureau of Global Health Security and Diplomacy, and others, as appropriate.²⁷

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

FEMA is the lead federal agency for helping U.S. states and territories prepare for, respond to, and recover from natural disasters. With offices throughout the U.S., FEMA's "Region 9" Office covers areas of the western continental U.S. as well as Hawai'i and U.S. Pacific territories. FEMA's role begins when state and territory capabilities and resources are insufficient to meet the scale of a hazard event.²⁸ The government of the state or territory communicates shortfalls to FEMA, and if FEMA is unable to address the shortfalls directly, they prepare Requests for Assistance (RFA) to be transmitted to other federal agencies, including DoD. In the case of the U.S. Pacific territories, the Defense Coordinating Element – West (DCE-W) validates the RFAs and sends validated Mission Assignments to U.S. INDOPACOM for approval, after which, U.S. Army – Pacific (USARPAC) assigns forces via a Mission Assignment Tasking Order (MATO).²⁹ FEMA offices commonly accommodate U.S. DoD liaison officers to coordinate major responses.³⁰ Within FSM and RMI, a financial-operational blueprint arrangement guides response actions by FEMA and the former U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID, now within DoS / PRM).³¹

Joint Task Force – Micronesia (JTF-M)

JTF-M was established in 2024 to provide Senior Military Official function, Homeland Defense, Foreign Humanitarian Aid, and DSCA to the JTF's joint operating area, which covers the three U.S.-affiliated FAS as well as the U.S. territories of CNMI, Guam, and Wake Island. A JTF-M role is to promote regional stability, including through DSCA and FHA / FDR operations.³² The JTF's planning for DSCA is guided by an Execution Order (EXORD) from U.S. INDOPACOM, and the JTF participates in seminars and TTX with partners in their joint operations area to prepare U.S. forces and communities in Guam and CNMI. The JTF is also building relationships and developing plans to support disaster response in the FAS.³³

Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT)

The PHT is a humanitarian country team that covers 14 PICTs, which fall under the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) Office of the Pacific Islands. The PHT comprises humanitarian organizations that help PICT governments and non-government organizations (NGO) prepare for and respond to disasters.³⁴

Pacific Resilience Partnership (PRP) Taskforce and Working Groups

The PRP Taskforce integrates representatives of the PICTs, civil society, the private sector, and regional and international organizations. It operationalizes the FRDP and guides the establishment and leadership of technical working groups that tackle various DM-related topics.³⁵

Pacific Response Group (PRG)

Endorsed by the SPDMM in October 2024, the PRG delivers multinational military cooperation in support of civilian-led disaster response. Although under SPDMM auspices, each of the PRG contributing states retains sovereign decision-making ability over how it chooses to participate. Command of the PRG Headquarters (HQ) rotates among members over time. The PRG HQ has the ability to deploy small, rapidly deployable forward planning teams, which include military personnel from Australia, Fiji, France, New Zealand, PNG, and Tonga. They can deploy upon request from an affected PIF member-state to provide military advice to civilian authorities and scope tasks for follow-on military assets.³⁶ The Planning Teams can be scaled to the needs of the operation and can comprise specialist military planners in Logistics, Operations, Intelligence, Health, Air, Maritime, Communications, and Engineering.³⁷

Pacific Islands Emergency Management Alliance (PIEMA)

PIEMA is an SPC project that launched in 2013 and is currently in its second phase (2023-2028). It focuses on developing best practices in regional emergency management to ensure more effective response. It integrates the national disaster management agencies of 14 PICTs.³⁸

United States Coast Guard (USCG)

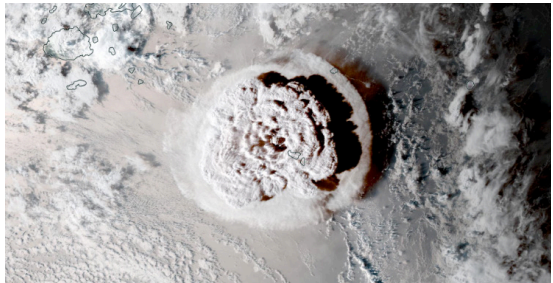
The USCG routinely conducts search and rescue, law enforcement, and port security cooperation operations with partners throughout the region. During disaster response operations, these relationships and coordination mechanisms connect technical experts, emergency managers, and decision-makers to rapidly respond to the most urgent needs. The USCG is unique among the U.S. uniformed services in that it has legal authorities that allow it to seamlessly cooperate with civil authorities in U.S. Territories.³⁹

Case Studies

The following mini-case studies were selected to illustrate key actions or processes identified as best practices for civil-military coordination in DM in the Pacific Islands region. They cover a volcanic eruption in Tonga in 2022, a typhoon that struck Guam in 2023, and the 2024 earthquake that impacted Vanuatu. They do not encompass the entire scope of past or potential future regional responses. Additional major events that may be of interest are Tropical Cyclones Pam (Fiji and Vanuatu, 2015), Winston (Fiji, 2016), Harold (Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu, 2020), and Kevin and Judy (Vanuatu, 2023); Mount Bagana Eruption (PNG, 2023); and the Kaikoura Earthquake (New Zealand, 2016).

Hunga Tonga – Hunga Ha‘apai (HTHH) Eruption (2022)

On 15 January 2022, Tonga’s HTHH volcano erupted, producing an atmospheric pressure wave, an ash plume, and a series of tsunamis, the largest of which reached 15 meters (49.2 feet).⁴⁰ As up to 50 millimeters (2 inches) of ash blanketed some areas, Tonga’s government declared a state of emergency and requested international assistance. The combined effects of the eruption, ashfall, and tsunamis impacted 85,000 people, displaced 2,400 people, and killed four people. At least 2,900 structures were damaged or destroyed.⁴¹ The photo at right shows imagery of the HTHH eruption as taken by the GOES-17 satellite.⁴²



Communications between Tonga and the rest of the world were almost entirely cut off as the undersea cable connecting Tonga and Fiji was damaged. Initial aerial surveys of the damage were performed by Australian and New Zealand Defence Forces. In support of Tonga’s government, of which the National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO) was the focal point, the PHT

and international organizations mobilized to respond.⁴³ The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator allocated US\$1 million that allowed the PHT to immediately begin delivering water-sanitation-hygiene (WASH) services, cash, and emergency telecom services.⁴⁴ Among other donor country responses, the U.S. Ambassador issued a DHN, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID, now within DoS PRM) immediately delivered funding to partners in the country.⁴⁵ Within 10 days after the eruption, the U.S. had announced US\$2.5 million in assistance to be delivered to Tonga.⁴⁶

Tonga's armed forces played a key role, first by clearing the country's main airport's runway to allow relief flights to land and later distributing supplies both on land and via ship. Because of the prevailing Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic, Tonga's government required a "contactless" relief delivery protocol at the international airport and ports.⁴⁷

Alongside Tonga's government and people and national and international humanitarians, eight military forces participated in the response. They included Australia, Fiji, France, Japan, New Zealand, the People's Republic of China (PRC), the UK, and the U.S.⁴⁸ Immediately after the eruption, France, Australia, and New Zealand activated the FRANZ mechanism and deployed maritime and air assets for reconnaissance and air- and sea-borne delivery of relief supplies and equipment. FRANZ partners liaised with NEMO to ensure "contactless" delivery.⁴⁹ Australia's Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) was the hub for multinational military coordination for all responding forces except those of the PRC.⁵⁰ The U.S. Navy's USS Sampson began to deliver assistance in Tonga on 25 January. She joined Australian, British, French, Japanese, and New Zealand naval ships delivering relief and conducting assessments. USAID and USCG assets also coordinated with Tongan and international responders. USS Sampson ended her relief mission on 4 February.⁵¹

Best Practice: Support long-term relationship building to promote both efficient delivery of assistance and accurate reporting on response operations.

PRC responders coordinated response operations only with the Government of Tonga and eschewed participation in other multinational civilian or military coordination mechanisms.⁵² As the response developed, observers noted that Tongan audiences – and some global ones – saw much more voluminous mass media coverage praising the PRC's assistance activities in comparison to coverage of other international responders. This attention ignored the fact that, in the end, other donors' financial and material assistance contributions dwarfed those of the PRC. This focus of coverage was not wholly down to the high-profile 19 January handover of food packs from the PRC's Embassy to the Government of Tonga⁵³ but rather related to the many years of relationship building the PRC had conducted in Tonga. The island country had received not only development and humanitarian assistance from Beijing, but the PRC had also cultivated Tonga's

political and journalism communities in ways that ensured a positive view of Beijing's role.⁵⁴

Best Practice: Plan for and source relief items that are not disposable but have a “next life” during recovery and reconstruction.

A key need during the HTHH response was safe drinking water because ash deposits and tsunami-wave inundation had contaminated water supplies. Initial deliveries of relief supplies included large amounts of bottled water that arrived via air and ship. Although Australian and New Zealand naval vessels did follow with large water tanks and desalination materials and equipment, one estimate found that 86,000 plastic bottles had been delivered by mid-April. In post-disaster studies, Tongan stakeholders critiqued aspects of the response. A key complaint was the waste with which the country contended after the acute response phase had ended. A combination of single-use plastics and unsolicited bilateral donations contributed to large amounts of waste that Tonga's people and businesses did not have the capacity to process – i.e., deliver to landfills, burn, or recycle. As a solution, Tongan volunteers partnered with the Australian government to manage plastic waste left from the HTHH response. They collected 3,000 kilograms (6,600 pounds) of plastic waste, compacted it on-site, and shipped it out of the country for processing.⁵⁵

Typhoon Mawar (2023)

Typhoon Mawar struck Guam on 24-25 May 2023. In addition to 0.45-0.6 meters (1.5-2 feet) of rainfall,⁵⁶ the storm brought 225-kilometer-per-hour (140-mile-per-hour) winds that devastated utilities networks. In the days before the storm, the territorial government made a pre-landfall request to Washington, DC, for an emergency declaration, and aid resources were flowing before the event.⁵⁷ Federal agencies prepared to respond. With FEMA as the lead federal agency, the response included the Department of Transport / Federal Aviation Administration, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Agriculture, the USCG, and components of the U.S. DoD, especially the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and Defense Information Systems Agency. All of them fulfilled Emergency Support Functions (ESF), as spelled out in the NRE.⁵⁸ The Pentagon directed the U.S. Navy's carrier USS Nimitz (CVN-68), embarked Carrier Air Wing 17, and the carrier strike group (CSG) to conduct DSCA, if requested.⁵⁹

Best Practice: Clear and transparent external communication helps manage public expectations, erodes the influence of disinformation, and supports community involvement.

The scale of the destruction was initially difficult for responders and the community to grasp due to telecommunications and transport disruptions. Although Guam had suffered more severe storms in the past, it had been 30

years since a major typhoon had made landfall. The acute phases of the response were characterized by high public expectations for swift reconnection, the emergence of mixed messages and mis-/disinformation regarding damage and responses, and a lack of “whole-of-community” understanding of emergency management.⁶⁰

During the first 36 hours after the storm, agencies of Guam’s government, FEMA, and DoD’s DCE-W processed assessments, reports, and RFAs manually with hard-copy (paper) forms. It was not until about 72 hours after the storm that digital systems were adequately restored for responding agencies to use dedicated digital and web-based communications and management tools. Guam Homeland Security / Office of Civil Defense (GHS/OCD) hosted crisis action team members from FEMA, various Guam government agency representatives, and volunteers.⁶¹ Although this arrangement would normally allow close cooperation, the GHS/OCD offices were too small to accommodate all liaisons, and they were separated out to Guam National Guard (GUNG) and U.S. Navy Santa Rita Complex office spaces.⁶²

Immediately after the storm made landfall, re-opening of the Port of Guam was of paramount importance to enable the flow of large quantities of food, fuel, and commodities into the island. The USCG, in partnership with USACE, the U.S. Navy, and other agencies assessed waterways and facilities, and the USCG led coordination of hazard clearance, ensured security, and authorized re-opening of the port within 72 hours of storm passage.⁶³

In the early days after the storm, the USCG and U.S. Pacific Air Forces transported various emergency response personnel, including FEMA responders. Moreover, various U.S. INDOPACOM staff offices were tasked with supporting FEMA in Guam. Andersen Air Force Base suffered significant damage but remained operational such that, in the first two weeks after the storm, it received 81,650 kilograms (180,000 pounds) of relief items.⁶⁴ Into early June, the Nimitz CSG remained off Guam to serve as a communications and transmission hub for local authorities until the island’s communications networks were restored. Additional resources came from the Air Force Civil Engineer Center’s Natural Disaster Recovery Division at Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida.⁶⁵ The photo at right shows U.S. Soldiers delivering FEMA supplies at Yona, Guam, on 3 June, as the island recovered from Typhoon Mawar.⁶⁶



Best Practice: Clear internal communication avoids confusion regarding requests for assistance, duplication of efforts, or working at cross-purposes.

Even as U.S. federal agencies, including DoD, were supporting the Guam government response, U.S. military units on Guam were responding to impacts on their own people and facilities. Early in the response, RFAs were comingled between local community and U.S. base needs, and there was confusion about responsibility for managing validation of RFAs.⁶⁷

Best Practice: Pre-positioning relief supplies within the region can reduce the time needed to deliver requested assistance across the vast distances in the Pacific, and the relationships required to set up pre-positioned stocks will support a more effective, coordinated response.

As part of an energy restoration mission, USACE moved 30 generators, many flown from Hawaii or California. The mission commander noted the “tyranny of distance” at play in the response because, “if it wasn’t [there] before the storm, [it was] hard to get there.”⁶⁸ Meanwhile, USARPAC and GUNG personnel were assigned to support the Governor of Guam and FEMA’s response and recovery programming.⁶⁹

Vanuatu Earthquake (2024)

Early in the afternoon of 17 December 2024, a 7.3-magnitude earthquake struck west of Port Vila, Vanuatu.⁷⁰ The quake and 300 2.0-5.3-magnitude⁷¹ aftershocks collapsed buildings, damaged bridges and roads, and triggered landslides,⁷² one of which covered the access road to the main port.⁷³ Telecommunications and water systems were damaged. The quake killed 14 people and injured 200. It displaced thousands and impacted some 80,000 people.⁷⁴

Best Practice: Respond to small island states’ “pull” requests for engagement and support and limit “push” to avoid overwhelming limited human and material capacity.

Port Vila’s Central Hospital was badly damaged, and with injured people flooding in, staff had to move the emergency department outside. The hospital staff were joined by Vanuatu Medical Assistance Team (VANMAT) members who were able to treat injuries, perform emergency surgery, and deliver babies.⁷⁵ The Government of Vanuatu declared a 7-day State of Emergency (SOE), and the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) launched its response. UN and other responders mobilized in response to the Government’s request for international support.⁷⁶ The NDMO activated the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) and the national cluster system to ensure that the Government guided the entire response.⁷⁷ The most urgent “pull” by the NDMO was a request for surge medical personnel and essential medical supplies ahead of other types of relief.⁷⁸

Best Practice: Very few PICTs have military forces. Be prepared to engage with police forces as the sole national security force.

The PHT convened its first meeting the day of the quake, and UN OCHA staff were on the ground both in Vanuatu and in Fiji, from which they were prepared to support coordination.⁷⁹ By 19 December, the UN World Food Programme's Pacific Humanitarian Aviation Service (PHAS) had activated to transport humanitarian personnel and cargo from Fiji to Port Vila,⁸⁰ and PHAS delivered UN and partner surge teams and relief items on 21 December 2024.⁸¹ Among the PHAS-delivered items were mobile storage units (MSU), which were requested by the NDMO for secure storage of humanitarian relief items before they were distributed or used.⁸²

In addition to mobilizing immediate funding for humanitarian action, France, Australia, and New Zealand convened to conduct a coordinated response under the auspices of the FRANZ Arrangement. Within hours after the quake, FRANZ partners coordinated and deployed surveillance flights to identify the scale and scope of damage. Within 24 hours, they began delivering support to Vanuatu's responders; this assistance included search and rescue, additional surveillance, medical support, and humanitarian supplies. Three urban search-and-rescue teams deployed and were later joined by specialist engineers and teams to re-establish water treatment and deliver drinking water. Three medical support teams conducted coordination, needs assessments, and surgical support at the Vanuatu Central Hospital. The Government established a Joint Police Operation Centre (JPOC) to oversee search-and-rescue operations.⁸³ Additional FRANZ-partner humanitarian coordination teams directly supported the NDMO, and FRANZ-partner police forces deployed to assist the Vanuatu Police Force's JPOC in command and control as well as disaster victim identification.

Together, the three FRANZ partners delivered upwards of US\$5.9 million in assistance in support of the Government of Vanuatu's response. The FRANZ-related assistance included more than 15,000 tons of emergency and medical supplies as well as equipment to support reestablishment of communications links. The three partners conducted more than 20 flights to deliver humanitarian responders and relief supplies. In addition to daily meetings comprising representatives of Paris, Canberra, Wellington, and Port Vila, they oversaw coordination with responders from other countries, including the U.S., Japan, and the UK, as well as the European Union and UN agencies, represented by UN OCHA.⁸⁴ By 31 December 2024, the FRANZ partners had conducted 39 flights to deliver supplies, transport humanitarian personnel and equipment, and carry out aerial assessments. The figure on the following page illustrates the platforms used during the operation.⁸⁵

Activity Summary		21 11		7		18		6	
Total Flights		France		New Zealand		PHAS		Aerial Assessment	
18 DEC 2024		19 DEC 2024		20 DEC 2024		21 DEC 2024		22 DEC 2024	
1 x C-17	DART Search & Rescue	1 x C-17	DART - ADF - AFP Equipment and Humanitarian Relief Supplies	1 x C-17	Humanitarian Relief Supplies for NDIMO from Aust Govt, ARC, UK Govt. Starlink Kits for Vanuatu Govt. MoRA, MoIA, VFP by Aust Govt	1 x C-17	Partner stores (CARE, SAVE, WV, VRC) Humanitarian Relief Supplies	2 x CASA	Humanitarian Relief Supplies
1 x C-130	DART team and equipment	1 x C-130	DART - ADF - AFP Equipment and Humanitarian Relief Supplies	1 x C-130	AFP Surge team	1 x C-130	1 Mobile Storage Unit (MSU) for NDIMO from WFP	1 x C-130	Humanitarian Relief Supplies
1 x G150	Careflight - 6 Person Australian Assistance Team (AUSMAT)	1 x C-130	USAR Personnel	1 x Falcon 200	Recon for NDIMO Aerial imagery	1 x C-130	Humanitarian Relief Supplies Heavy equipment from NZDF	1 x C-130	Humanitarian Relief Supplies Psychosocial Personnel
1 x Boeing P8 Poseidon	Aerial Assessment	1 x Boeing 757	Humanitarian Relief Supplies	3 x CASA	Humanitarian Relief Supplies and Repatriation flight	3 x CASA	Humanitarian Relief Supplies Repatriation flight	2 x CASA	Humanitarian Relief Supplies
1 x Falcon Guardian	Aerial Assessment	1 x Boeing P8 Poseidon	Aerial Assessment	1 x Boeing P8 Poseidon	Aerial Assessment	2 x PUMA	Aerial Assessment with National and International partners	1 x PUMA	Return flight for NZ Disaster Response Personnel
1 x CASA	Personnel reinforcement	3 x CASA	Humanitarian Relief Supplies	1 x Air Nauru - PHAS Flight	35 Surge Personnel, Humanitarian Relief Supplies from Aust Govt & PHT, Starlink kits and telecom equipment and Protection kits.	1 x Air Nauru - PHAS Flight	35 Surge Personnel, Humanitarian Relief Supplies from Aust Govt & PHT, Starlink kits and telecom equipment and Protection kits.	1 x Boeing 757-200	Humanitarian Relief Supplies
1 x PUMA	Satellite Comm and Engineers	1 x Military supply (FAIRIDER)							

USAID immediately provided US\$250,000 in assistance and deployed a team to Port Vila, where it maintained pre-positioned relief supplies. The Japan International Cooperation Agency dispatched a medical support team and provided emergency supplies, water purifiers, and generators.⁸⁶ India delivered US\$500,000 for relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction.⁸⁷ On 30 December, the PRC sent a team of seismic experts to conduct building safety assessments,⁸⁸ and Beijing followed with a chartered flight carrying 35 tons of supplies.⁸⁹ Additional emergency medical teams represented Australia, Fiji, Indonesia, New Zealand, and the Pasifika Medical Association Medical Assistance Team. Various members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement assisted.⁹⁰ Following a request for assistance from the Vanuatu Government, a PRG Planning Team arrived with military members from Australia, Fiji, France, New Zealand, PNG, and Tonga. A Pacific Police Support Group delivered support; it had Australian, PNG, and Solomon Islands officers.⁹¹

On 24 December 2024, the SOE ended, and the Government transitioned control from the NEOC to the Recovery Operations Centre (ROC), which the NDMO stood up on 25 December.⁹² On 15 January, NDMO's Response Operations ended, and the ROC shifted to reporting sectoral recovery activities.⁹³

Conclusion

The PICTs confront geophysical, hydrometeorological, and anthropogenic hazards. With a few exceptions their ability to build coping capacity is limited by their small geographic size, small population, and small economies, combined with vast distances that separate them. To build coping capacity and reduce vulnerabilities, the PICTs have built ties for collaboration and cooperation to mobilize DM resources and knowledge.

Each PICT has a national DM authority that is the focal point for local, national, and international stakeholder coordination before, during, and after a hazard event. With the affected country's government – via the DM authority – leading any response, other governments' agencies – including their militaries – will deliver relief in support of the affected government(s). Various humanitarian, civil-military, and military-military coordination mechanisms may be used to ensure all responding entities are meeting affected-state needs in a timely and effective manner.

Responding countries' government agencies – including militaries – respond as allowed by and detailed in their own laws and policies. For the U.S. Government, FHA and FDR are led by the DoS, with support as requested, from other federal agencies, including the DoD. In the U.S. Pacific territories – American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam – disaster response operations fall under the U.S. federal government's framework for domestic response, led by FEMA. At the request

of an affected U.S. territory's authorities, a FEMA-led U.S. federal response may include DoD capacities as part of DSCA, as FEMA identifies requests for assistance that cannot be filled by other agencies.

Recent disaster events have highlighted important aspects of regional DM. Volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, earthquakes, and tropical storms have elicited large-scale humanitarian responses involving foreign military assets. From these responses, best practices for civil-military coordination have been identified. Responding military forces can ensure effectiveness through pre-disaster planning for movement, communications, and coordination. Planning requires intentional engagement with regional organizations, an understanding of guidelines and frameworks, and the ability to integrate with lead civilian agencies.

Implementation of the best practices in this pamphlet may help avoid harmful secondary impacts after a disaster and will ensure that scarce resources are used in the most efficient and life-saving manner.

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Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance
456 Hornet Avenue, Joint Base Pearl Harbor - Hickam, Hawaii 96860-3503
Telephone: (808) 472-0518
<https://www.cfe-dmha.org>