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## BEST PRACTICES FOR DOD PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS IN FOREIGN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE



# Series of Best Practices Pamphlets by CFE-DM



- Civil-Military Coordination in Foreign Disaster Relief: Best Practices for Affected & Assisting States
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Cover photos: Top: An MH-60R Seahawk Helicopter prepares for take-off from the USS Sampson in support of disaster relief efforts in Tonga. Bottom: Captain Tait, Thailand, 2018. Middle: Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan visits the Joint Task Force – Tohoku, 10 April 2011.<sup>1</sup>

# Executive Summary

**Purpose:** The purpose of this pamphlet is to provide a condensed set of best practices on U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) messaging during U.S. DoD peacetime foreign humanitarian assistance (FHA) operations, which includes foreign disaster response (FDR), building upon established doctrine.

**Scope:** The scope is foreign humanitarian assistance operations during peacetime.

This pamphlet builds upon established DoD doctrine, particularly that provided in Joint Publication (JP) 3-29 Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA) and JP 3-61 Public Affairs (PA). The best practices featured here align with doctrine and have been illuminated through interviews with subject matter experts (SME) who are familiar with public affairs practices in DoD during FHA operations in the past decade.

This pamphlet will not cover conflict situations. In conflict, the messaging of a DoD Public Affairs Officer (PAO) is more structured due to explicit, comprehensive instructions that have been firmly established.

This pamphlet is applicable globally but focuses on cases in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR).

## Key Points:

- The U.S. is there at the invitation of the host nation – underscore U.S. Government (USG) support to host nation-led relief efforts in DoD messaging
- Understand the USG interagency environment
- Coordinate relief and messaging with the U.S. Embassy’
- Be prepared to quickly respond with messaging – have a template ready to go
- Be truthful – counter dis- and misinformation
- Exercise PA function and build relationships in FHA training scenarios
- Include PA in FHA planning

# Introduction

## Why This Matters

Public affairs officers can contribute significantly toward improving strategic relations during international disaster responses – but they must navigate an ambiguous space during a fraught time.

Peacetime FHA usually comes with less explicit and often iterative guidance for DoD public affairs officers when compared to conflict situations or even large military exercises. The start of an international disaster response is characterized by an extremely fast-paced operational tempo alongside intense media interest. The emergent and catastrophic nature of the disaster complicates the means by which PAOs and Commanders provide reliable information – especially in the immediate wake of disasters. This chaotic information environment can also include misinformation and adversarial disinformation, which can have profound second- and third-order effects on affected populations, the operational environment, and the DoD mission. While DoD doctrine provides sound general guidance, this pamphlet builds upon that by focusing on select cases to illustrate operational best practices and illuminating details that inform doctrine and align with policy.

When the DoD executes a FDR mission, the ongoing disaster response often garners global, regional, or national media coverage that may be intense enough to dominate the news cycle. In the past two decades, INDOPACOM has responded to numerous FDR missions.<sup>2</sup> The missions not only saved lives and alleviated suffering but also contributed towards improving bilateral and multilateral relations. Each disaster mission comes with strategic communication challenges and opportunities.

PAOs play a critical part in communicating the U.S. contributions to international disaster response. Key elements of successful messaging include USG interagency familiarity and coordination in support of the host nation, managing expectations, providing accurate and timely information, dedicated social media resources, and aligning themes and talking points with the commander's intent and the U.S. Embassy, including the integrated country strategy.

# Background

FHA operations to which the U.S. DoD has deployed to have played important roles in building strategic relationships. The significance of disaster responses' strategic impacts can be seen in how disaster management in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region is still impacted by the legacy of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which killed more than 228,000 people and affected 14 countries,<sup>3</sup> with the most heavily impacted nations in the INDOPACOM (then PACOM) AOR, including Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, and the Maldives.

Each FHA mission aims to save lives, alleviate suffering, and build strategic relations in line with U.S. interests. This aligns with the criteria needed for the U.S. Chief of Mission to issue a Declaration of Humanitarian Need (DHN) in a foreign country:

1. There is evidence of significant unmet humanitarian need,
2. USG humanitarian assistance will save lives, reduce human suffering, and mitigate the impact of humanitarian emergencies on the most vulnerable,
3. The host country requests or will accept international assistance, and
4. Responding aligns with USG interests and humanitarian objectives.<sup>4</sup>

When the U.S. responds to a foreign disaster, the U.S. Agency for International Development's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA) is the lead coordinator of the USG international response. The operational environment during foreign humanitarian assistance is often a large-scale disaster response or other situation with heightened human interest and that attracts widespread and intense media coverage. In some large-scale or complex crises, USAID/BHA may require the unique capabilities of DoD to support response activities through the use of military equipment, personnel, and/or technical expertise. Such DoD support happens in approximately ten percent of the foreign disasters to which USAID/BHA responds.

## Doctrine and Guidance

This document builds upon existing DoD doctrine, instructions, and guidance to illustrate with experience-based best practices. Current doctrine recognizes the heightened challenges of and need for public affairs in FHA. According to *Joint Publication (JP) 3-61 Public Affairs (PA)*, "These [FHA] missions involve a delicate balance of political and military objectives. FHA missions include operational and informational coordination with HN [host nation], other USG departments and agencies, and NGO [non-governmental organization] relief organizations. Intense media and public interest in FHA operations may require more than usual PA capabilities."<sup>5</sup>

Per JP 3-29, “PA should be involved during initial FHA operational planning because disseminating information to the public and interacting with the news media are critical to mission success.” It further states, “publicizing assistance efforts should not impede relief operations nor put aid workers or beneficiaries at risk. Coordination with the HN via the country team is critical to ensure public information activities do not conflict with, undermine, or outshine the efforts of the HN.”<sup>6</sup>

The quoted doctrine highlights enduring themes for strategic communication in FHA. These themes have historically emerged across multiple U.S. FHA missions to the extent that they are included in the USINDOPACOM Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA) Contingency Plan (CONPLAN):

- Combatant Command (COCOM) readiness
- International and regional cooperation
- Host Nation in the lead
- Support to the U.S. Lead Federal Agency
- Temporary nature of DoD support to provide unique capabilities

Common DoD communication objectives in FHA missions include:

- Message that DoD is in support of the U.S. lead federal agency to assist the Affected State in a locally-led response<sup>\*</sup>
- Message that the U.S. is part of a multinational effort, often working alongside other state responders and humanitarian organizations in supporting the Affected State in meeting humanitarian needs
- Retain the public’s confidence in the Affected State government
- Preserve working relationships with the media
- Protect the well-being of U.S. armed forces providing assistance<sup>7</sup>

Observations from past FDR missions, included in *DoD Support to Foreign Disaster Relief: Handbook for Responding Forces*, align with best practices on DoD communication in humanitarian assistance:

- Develop a communication synchronization plan with the U.S. Embassy, including the Lead Federal Agency, and Affected State
- Plan for PA personnel to be on the early-entry team, such as the Humanitarian Assistance Survey Team (HAST), and coordinating in support of USAID/BHA-deployed Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART)
- Add a social media expert on the Joint Manning Document (JMD) for the response to coordinate messaging with the U.S. Embassy and USAID/BHA or amplify messaging from the U.S. Embassy or USAID/BHA’s social media platforms
- Leverage the social media platforms used by target audiences
- Develop and distribute a daily “Joint Task Force 2-Pager” or similar product that includes response themes, priorities, talking points, facts, and figures

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<sup>\*</sup> Rare exceptions to messaging that the Affected State is in the lead have included FHA where the Affected State lacks central government control. In cases where this has happened due to instability, messaging may still strive to reflect working with certain authorities as appropriate.

- Do not raise inappropriate expectations regarding DoD's role and support
- Be timely, accurate, transparent, and consistent with information
- The commander's and higher headquarters' intent guide key themes and messages<sup>8</sup>

## Best Practices

Best practices are drawn from various FHA missions and described by PAOs with operational experience. While best practices are drawn from a wide range of experiences, two missions on opposing extremes of the spectrum have figured more prominently among SMEs interviewed – the 2018 Thai Cave Rescue and the 2011 Japan earthquake, tsunami, and radiological disaster.

Regardless of the variations among responses, the DoD assists as part of a whole-of-USG response, led by USAID in foreign disaster responses. USG efforts are in support of the affected state and in coordination with multinational actors, including the international humanitarian system, which USAID has the core competency to help the DoD navigate.<sup>9</sup>

### 2011 Operation Tomodachi / Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami, and Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Accident

On 11 March 2011, a magnitude 9.0 undersea earthquake struck off the coast of Japan's Tohoku (Northeast) region; it triggered a tsunami, which flooded the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant and knocked out the generators that powered the cooling system. Approximately 20,000 people died, the vast majority of whom drowned in the tsunami.<sup>10</sup> USAID led the U.S. government response to the disaster, deploying a DART and requesting DoD assistance.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. armed forces, particularly U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ), responded with Operation Tomodachi, supporting Japan with approximately 24,000 military personnel, 189 aircraft, and 24 ships.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. military's large presence highlighted the importance of coordinating response and messaging activities with the affected state, particularly as a close ally.

### 2018 Tham Luang Thai Cave Rescue

On 23 June 2018 in Thailand, 12 members of the Wild Boar soccer team, aged 11-16 years, and their coach went missing far inside Chiang Rai Province's Tham Luang Khun Nam Nang Non cave system, which flooded quickly after heavy rain. By 2 July, a United Kingdom dive team found all 13 members of the soccer team alive, and by 10 July all of them had been rescued.<sup>13</sup>

This case is unique in several ways. In terms of only 13 people being directly affected, this was a very small-scale event. The incident was contained within a single province, unlike foreign disasters that typically have nationwide impacts. The U.S. Ambassador declared a foreign disaster, following which the Department of State issued an Executive Secretary (EXECSEC) Memo to the DoD requesting support. This mission is instructive for how DoD flexed to handle unusual on-the-scene messaging in a widely watched event. While just one unit from the U.S. military responded to assist with a narrow mission, the Thai Cave Rescue was the leading global story and dominated the global news cycle for weeks. Thus, this event is significant for public affairs given the intense media scrutiny. The human interest element of the missing children contributed to the story dominating Thai national media and being heavily covered in global media for weeks.

## 2022 Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai Volcano Eruption and Tsunami Response

On 15 January 2022, an explosive eruption from the underwater Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano caused tsunami waves up to 15 meters (49 feet) high for the west coasts of some Tongan islands and thick ashfall that affected approximately 84,000 people, about 84% of the country's population.<sup>14</sup> The government of Tonga requested international assistance and issued a State of Emergency on 19 January (commencing 16 January and running to 13 February). Australia's Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) established a new humanitarian and disaster relief international coordination cell that brought together defense personnel from Tonga, Fiji, Japan, France, New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, and the U.S. China's army delivered relief supplies on their own.<sup>15</sup> Through USAID, the U.S. provided more than \$2.5 million in assistance, with relief efforts delivered through the Tonga Red Cross Society and other implementing partners.<sup>16</sup> The DoD deployed USS Sampson, which dispatched helicopters to assist with aerial surveys ahead of its arrival in Tonga on 25 January to further support relief efforts.<sup>17</sup>

### Best Practice: Understand interagency actors, roles, and responsibilities

It is critical to know and understand the relevant U.S. interagency actors and their roles in a foreign humanitarian response to coordinate effectively. "Understanding the whole interagency aspect is crucial," stated Major Jessica Tait, who was the PAO with the U.S. Air Force 353rd Special Operations Group (SOG) during the Thai cave rescue operation. "If the PAO doesn't understand who's who in the zoo [relevant actors in the disaster response] you're already going to be struggling, and you can't establish that [knowledge] in a crisis... Whatever AOR you're in, touch base with key people you have to work with, so they know who you are," said Tait, who coordinated closely with the U.S. Embassy and handled numerous interviews during the operation.

Most U.S. FDR operations will have USAID leading coordination of the USG response. The Thai Cave rescue was not a typical FDR mission as usually seen following a large-scale natural disaster. It was unique in that interagency coordination was primarily between DoD and the U.S. State Department (State), with USAID playing a smaller role. However, to prepare for typical FDR operations, interagency operations should be exercised involving at least USAID, DoD, and State.

**Best Practice:** Military and interagency exercises should include public affairs. Training should include:

- 1) Interagency participants and roles
- 2) Foreign humanitarian assistance scenario
- 3) Joint Task Force (JTF)

Military exercises are an important opportunity for personnel who may potentially have to work together in a disaster response to first train together. Having known contacts among responders from other agencies facilitates faster, smoother coordination.

U.S. public affairs personnel working together in the Thai Cave Rescue had previously participated in exercises in Thailand; these exercises gave them not only international disaster response training but also the chance to meet and work together before the crisis. “I was working with [INDO]PACOM on exercises – Cobra Gold – so I knew who a lot of the relevant people would be,” stated Steve Castonguay, who was the U.S. Embassy spokesperson for the cave rescue operation. “The fact that I had met Jessica [Tait] the previous year at Cobra Gold – that DoD and State had worked together in Public Affairs on exercises, exercising and ensuring in the military exercise that DoD and State latch-up – is helpful. It gave us familiarity with each other’s doctrine, and we were able to latch-up and establish respective lines of effort.”

Exercises with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) components have contributed to preparing personnel for actual operations. According to Tait, “The Thai Cave Rescue was my only HADR operation, but I had done a lot of military exercises, including with HADR as part of scenario. At the Defense Information School (DINFOS) where PAOs train, they also use scenarios to help train.” She also credits DINFOS’ six-week Public Affairs Qualification Course as very helpful. Realistic, interactive, scenario-based learning improves retention and provides effective training to prepare to respond to a disaster or other crisis.

Exercising a JTF, including a PAO’s role in one, is also beneficial. The Thai cave incident was an outlier as it was a small operation without a JTF. However, most FDR operations to which the U.S. DoD deploys will likely be large enough in scale to have a JTF. “Practicing JTF exercises will help,” stated Dave Werner, who worked with Operation Tomodachi as a PAO. Initial interagency requests or best

practices in FHA often include a JTF PAO coordinating efforts with the USAID DART Press Officer (PRO). As DoD deployment to peacetime FHA missions is typically for a short duration, perhaps a few weeks, a JTF in this situation is likely to be shorter term, thus exercising that element is beneficial.

Planning for public affairs and communication at the onset of international disaster response planning and training is paramount. “It’s important to have a seat at the table. [Ensure PA considerations in] planning and annexes including for exercise and operations, not just when a disaster happens. That energy and intent must be invested on the front end,” Werner recommended.

**Best Practice:** Messaging should reflect supporting the affected nation with a multinational effort – not just the U.S. role.

Public affairs messaging should be conscientious of conveying the overall picture. Just as foreign disaster responders must respect the sovereignty of, and coordinate in support of, the Affected State, so should public affairs personnel portray the overall operation and not just the role of their assisting state or organization.

This consideration is outlined in *JP 3-61*, which states, “JFCs [Joint Force Commanders] and their PA staffs should exercise care so that their attempts to demonstrate DoD responsiveness, concern, and assistance do not preempt the authority of the political leadership or HN or appear to be taking credit for successes at the expense of other contributing parties. PA planners can emphasize the U.S. support role to HN, local government, and other organizations efforts. PA planning can also focus on unique capabilities of U.S. forces that are required in the effort and augment primary efforts of other organizations.”<sup>18</sup>

DoD press releases during the response to the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha’apai volcano eruption and tsunami emphasized the multinational nature of the response efforts. “The USS Sampson...is providing lifesaving efforts and assistance alongside France, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Japan and others. The multinational approach by allies and partners to assist friends in need demonstrates our shared values towards regional stability and security,” the USINDOPACOM public affairs director was reported as stating.<sup>19</sup>

The DoD may have an outsized PAO presence available on the ground, in which case the PAOs have a greater responsibility to message the bigger picture responsibly. This was the case during the Thai Cave Rescue operation, which was a Thai-led effort involving Thai Navy SEALs and with the technical cave diving expertise provided by UK and Australian cave rescue divers. U.S. interagency personnel, including USAF 353rd SOG, provided primarily logistics and communication support. “We did not want to message that Americans were here to save the day,” said Tait. She emphasized the desire to tell the truth of

the overall Thai-led rescue efforts and was conscientious that a public affairs presence was stretched thin among host nation personnel on site and not present among other assisting state responders. As Tait described: “Chinese divers didn’t bring PAO; Aussies [Australians] had no PAO. The Thai military had PAO but we had trouble finding and coordinating with them, thus didn’t [connect with] that person on the ground. We wanted to coordinate with the host country, but DoD PAOs were the PAOs present on the ground. Thus, we were very cognizant of messaging the big picture, weaving their [Thai] messaging into ours.”

Similarly, Castonguay said, “We foot-stomped [emphasized] always [that] we were part of a Thai-led multinational effort. [That] was really important for us to message. We worked hard to message in line with Thai and local government strategy, to not give interviews ahead of the governor [of Chiang Rai province who led the rescue effort] giving updates, but to follow him and circle back with his press team... They initially were overwhelmed by the press, but it fell in place and we fell in lock step with synchronicity of messaging and press engagement.”

This conscientiousness extended to messaging across all media, including social media. Castonguay said, “We didn’t create special hashtags. That would look insensitive like we were trying to brand our efforts. Her [Tait] unit and the U.S. Embassy had respective hashtags and mottos that we [Department of State] incorporated into products.”

As Tait’s media presence grew increasingly popular in Thailand, she described fielding the attention and pivoting to refocus it on the mission. “If I was asked a personal question, I would weave in talking points and a focus on the Thai people back into my answer. People are going to ask what they’re going to ask, I can only control how I respond.”

This principle has been echoed by various DoD personnel responding to other FHA. JP 3-29 quotes Lt. Col. Rob James, III MEF PAO, who responded to the 2015 Nepal earthquake; James said, “HADR attracts a significant amount of media, and our uniforms being present helping deal with such situations, sends a powerful story. It is very easy to inadvertently give the impression that [the Marine Corps or the joint force] are coming in to save the day...we need to be very cognizant of that and make every effort not to alienate our partners and stakeholders, because we need them ultimately to be successful.”<sup>20</sup>

**Best Practice:** Develop a template beforehand, to enable quick messaging at crisis onset.

Develop most of a template for a sample disaster response press release ahead of time to enable getting a message out quickly at the onset of a crisis by filling in the last details.

“Have a template set up for HADR mission. Have something ready to go in a matter of minutes, to show America is aware of and assessing the situation,” recommended Kerry Gershaneck, who is a former spokesperson for the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and who subsequently led Department of the Navy PAOs for nuclear/radiological incidents in the Pacific Region PAO during Operation Tomodachi. Many disasters are rapid-onset events that will demand quick but appropriate messaging. When the DoD responds to a foreign disaster, its assets are usually needed at the beginning of the disaster response. In some instances, Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) was not completed and approved until the DoD response was mostly over. Gershaneck elaborated, “Don’t wait for PAG to be developed. There should be a template already developed 95%. Get the last 5% in the first few minutes of [crisis] response, so the U.S. can get something out globally right away. If we’re slow, criticism of ‘where is the U.S.?’ or misinformation can start.” In crisis messaging, “speed counts.”

This preparedness was practiced to good effect during the Thai Cave Rescue by Tait. She said, “I can put together a press release on the plane on my cell phone. I texted talking points to Steve [Castonguay, USEMB spokesperson] to share with Washington, so I am able to use them the next morning... working around time zone differences.”

Timely messaging is usually enhanced with an active, not passive, approach to public affairs. Generally, “an active posture is recommended whenever possible [for a public affairs approach],” per DoD Instruction 5405.03.<sup>21</sup> If there is already PAG for the disaster or crisis response, whatever public affairs approach and other instructions are specified in the PAG should be followed.<sup>22</sup> When a PAG is available, disseminate it to commanders on the ground, who are likely to give high-profile interviews. “Once you have approved PAG, every commander in the field can have it in [their] hip pocket. You want to allow the people providing assistance on the ground--the ‘face of America,’ so to speak--to be able to talk about the operation in general and to be able to talk specifically about what they are doing to help, but don’t go beyond that,” said Gershaneck.

The following are some overarching themes that can serve as a starting point for DoD messaging in FHA, as recommended in *DoD Support to Foreign Disaster Relief: Handbook for Responding Forces*:

- U.S. DoD expresses its sincere condolences to the affected people and is working closely with Affected State authorities to respond in this time of crisis
- The role of U.S. military forces during any FDR event is to respond rapidly to save lives and alleviate human suffering
- When called upon, U.S. military forces will extend assistance to victims of natural or man-made disasters and support efforts to reduce risk to vulnerable populations
- U.S. military assists at the request of the Affected State and in support of U.S. government relief operations

- U.S. military supports the HADR efforts of the U.S. Department of State and USAID
- During FDR missions, U.S. military forces are part of a larger U.S. whole-of-government effort, led by USAID/BHA
- Key to success is the unity of effort by the Affected State, USG, and civilian aid organizations<sup>23</sup>

**Best Practice:** Synchronize PAO messaging with the U.S. Country Team’s Integrated Country Strategy (ICS).

PAO messaging should synchronize with the U.S. Country Team’s Integrated Country Strategy (ICS). The ICS is a four-year strategy that articulates the U.S. priorities in a given country. It is developed with USG interagency input, led by the Chief of Mission.

This synchronization was a point that Castonguay was conscientious of during the Thai Cave Rescue operation, so that communications reflect a whole-of-government effort. Integrated Country Strategies are publicly available at: <https://www.state.gov/integrated-country-strategies/#eap>

**Best Practice:** Understand the process of clearing talking points and how PAOs will support the USG assistance effort.

Clarifying the approval process of talking points may be needed, especially if event-specific PAG has yet to be issued.

In the Thai Cave Rescue operation, the USG response was unique as it primarily involved DoD and the State Department. However, the response is noteworthy for the close interagency coordination among public affairs personnel.

Castonguay reflected, “It was occasionally time-consuming for DoD to clear talking points. Was it at component command level? Or at OSD level? One gap, initially, was a clearly defined clearance process on the DoD side for talking points and media engagement for their PAO. It was eventually sorted, but at the onset had some operational impact.” The initial operational impact was mitigated by Castonguay, the USEMB spokesperson, who coordinated closely with Tait, the US Air Force PAO on the ground.

PAOs should understand the clearance process. If there is a JTF, it will include a PAO. However, the U.S. Embassy may or may not have a PAO on scene with the combined task force, but they will certainly be involved in messaging and clearance of key talking points. Additionally, in a large-scale response, there will likely be additional PAO presence beyond that in a JTF.

Werner said, “When there are gaps, it’s on PAOs to manage effectively with cognizant authorities in the absence of straightforward guidance.” He advised that when issues arise, warning must be given across the interagency, the host country, allies, and partners.

**Best Practice: Tell the truth.**

While obvious, this is a point worth restating from the guidance – tell the truth, be transparent, and provide accurate information.

“From a PA standpoint, the most important tool we had in Tomodachi and Haiti [responding to the 2010 earthquake] was transparency, being able to answer every question straightforwardly,” stated Werner. He spoke of the importance of respecting the host nation and reinforcing overarching themes, such as resolve and commitment for partners, in collaboration with the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and Navy, as well as talking points on the “5 Ws” (who, what, when, where, and why). “Day to day, making any and all information available – by providing credible developments, imagery, and information – made it hard for adversaries to counter-message,” Werner explained.

The uncertainty around the radiological risk in Operation Tomodachi was a challenge for how to accurately and constructively message what was known. Gershaneck stated, “The biggest thing was the uncertainty of knowing radiological circumstances; trying to find out how the threat was growing. We had to be extremely careful regarding the panic level. Radiological incidents are unique. The challenge is it’s an invisible deadly threat... Need to frame the message so you’re not lying but not causing panic.”

Varying levels of conservatism between the U.S. and Japan’s initial approach to the radiological aspect (e.g., specifying different evacuation areas) contributed to mixed messaging.<sup>24</sup> Communicating and synchronizing messaging as much as possible is important to mitigate confusion or mistrust.

“Ninety percent of it was matter-of-fact reporting – here’s what we’re doing; opportunities to show U.S. and Japan working together; flying Japanese out to U.S. ships, having Japanese and U.S. representatives working side-by-side,” said Werner. He noted information release had to be negotiated regarding Fukushima but the majority of messaging showed the two countries working together. “When there were differences, some of it came down to who knew what. There were uncertainties, especially with radiological [aspects].” Werner discussed the challenge of reconciling national narratives, noting the U.S. wanted to support its ally, wanted to reassure U.S. families it was safe, and wanted to message truthfully.

Actual and perceived transparency both count. *DoDI 5400.17 Official Use of Social Media* for Public Affairs Purposes goes so far as to restrict deleting accurate posts, lest it gives even the appearance of hiding something: “Posts released from official DoD social media accounts must be: (1) Accurate. (2) Appropriate. (3) Timely. (4) In the Appropriate Tone. (5) Approved for public release. Furthermore, for the sake of transparency, social media content should not be removed from official DoD accounts unless there is a factual or typographical error.”<sup>25</sup>

Disasters and crises cause confusion. Accurate and timely information becomes critical for affected populations to make decisions for their own well-being and for disaster responders to effectively help and maintain legitimacy.

**Best Practice:** Countering misinformation is critical:

- 1) Speed counts in messaging.
- 2) Consistently message themes and talking points.
- 3) Consider larger team effort beyond PAO to assess information environment.

False information has harmful effects on affected populations – particularly with issues of protection, assistance, communication, and security – as well as on responders’ operations. While misinformation (unintentionally wrong information) and disinformation (intentionally wrong information) are not new, in our digitized information environment they spread and influence different audiences in accelerated and amplified ways.

Gershaneck stated, “Speed counts. There will be an onslaught of disinformation from adversaries in addition to the usual misinformation common in the early hours of a disaster. It is naive to not anticipate this type of attack to form enduring impressions, and the side that wins is the side that gets it messaging out the fastest. The golden hour is truncated to five minutes, hence the importance of a checklist including prepared statements that can go out.”

Werner observed, “In Tomodachi, [adversarial messaging] was, ‘at the first sign of danger the U.S. Navy is leaving the island but telling you it’s safe.’ Their goal is to have people question what we’re putting out. It’s easy and that’s why it’s a go-to for them.” Werner further stated, “We knew adversaries would exploit any appearance we were not supporting our Japanese allies. We wanted to make sure people knew our commitment to Japan and security in region.” Werner notes the PAO is likely to need to tell an important story amid a global spectacle. That story is: “Not just to assure host nation and allies and partners, but to rebuff adversarial attempts to suggest otherwise.”

RAND research on foreign disinformation, including but not focused solely on disasters, found that disinformation campaigns on social media by adversarial

governments are more nuanced than commonly portrayed, and much of the USG response to disinformation remains ad hoc and uncoordinated.<sup>26</sup>

If the information environment necessitates a larger effort to assess and counter false information, Gershaneck advised considering a larger team effort beyond the PAOs on the ground. “That doesn’t have to be done on site. It can be done with reach-back support, so you don’t need to use limited resources on the ground. It doesn’t just have to be public affairs resources monitoring, assessing, and building capacity to counter misinformation – PAOs on the frontline do not have this capability. [Consider] a crisis communication center,” Gershaneck recommended. Be aware that the international humanitarian community is also concerned with “misinformation, disinformation and hate speech (MDH),” as the International Committee of the Red Cross terms the phenomenon in relation to humanitarian crises, for its impact on disaster-affected people and on their own operations and security – especially if their perceived neutrality, impartiality, or independence is undermined. To that end, humanitarian organizations will strive to avoid getting caught up in messaging and counter-messaging between adversarial nations, especially militaries.

A humanitarian lesson learned is that methods must be people-centered. Automated technologies are most effective when used by experts with ethnographic expertise.<sup>27</sup> Humanitarian organizations use various frameworks to tackle misinformation, ranging from an information ecosystem assessment to rumor tracking methodology.

**Best Practice: Have a dedicated social media expert or team.**

The joint manning document for the response should include expert personnel dedicated to social media. Depending on the size of the disaster response operation, a social media team may be necessary.

For the Thai Cave Rescue, the USEMB team had a dedicated social media manager who was proactive and leveraged opportunities. Tait’s interviews were so well received by the Thai audience that a Thai beauty pageant winner who was volunteering on site took a selfie with her; that photo “blew up and trended on social media and fed in positively.” The social media manager “leaned into me blowing up on social media. For the Fourth of July, she had me do an Instagram video.” Tait pointed to this instance as an example of leveraging positive social media trends.

For Operation Tomodachi, there were multiple teams addressing social media. One team, located at Pearl Harbor, where Gershaneck was working, monitored social media for posts referencing radiological incidents. This effort included a “person doing online word searches for any reports that came up about radiological incident. If the U.S. Embassy does this routinely in native language,

even better,” Gershaneck said.

“Social media was really helpful for a visible presence in responding to Tomodachi,” stated Werner, who was working with the U.S. Navy Office of Information in Washington, D.C. The Seventh Fleet, which was delivering relief to Japan, was providing a daily complete post and cataloging what they had seen and done. Werner also worked on the 2010 Haiti earthquake response from the same office; during that response, it was revelatory to see that personnel in headquarters realized that PAOs watching social media in real time had information not yet available to the watch captain. Since then, use of social media has grown exponentially. “Technology and capability is mushrooming; it’s never static and expression is available to most anyone. The challenge is in producing credible, defensible disaster relief communication hand-in-glove with the host nation as we’re there at their invitation. It’s often iterative guidance, as we must partner with the country we’re being asked to support... We need to be flexible as communicators,” said Werner.

Gershaneck advised, “Find and employ credible organizations and key influencers on the key social media platforms in the area where you are conducting the HADR operation. Remember that you are there at the invitation of the affected state in most cases, so the host nation should be able to help identify organizations, influencers, and the most important platforms. The U.S. Embassy PAO should also have this insight. Use these means to inform your audiences and to counter disinformation and misinformation on a continuous basis.” Gershaneck notes while most online influencers are real people, the U.S. Embassy PAO likely has awareness of those accounts considered illegitimate, which should be part of coordination going into the response operation.

Social media is a critical part of crisis communications as it has become the primary method of communicating in real time. While the below is not a comprehensive list of social media best practices, key points include:

- Be aware that social media posts may compromise the safety and security of responders and aid beneficiaries.<sup>28</sup>
- Ensure posted materials including photos respect the dignity of beneficiaries and communities impacted by disasters – avoid disaster voyeurism that only shows vulnerabilities and fears; instead, select content that objectively portrays the disaster situation including affected people’s capacities.<sup>29</sup>
- Post timely and relevant information.<sup>30</sup>
- Ensure enough trained staff are available to monitor what others are saying on social media during crisis response and engage when appropriate.

**Best Practice: Keep a pre-packed “go bag” ready to deploy.**

“Have a go kit, ready to deploy,” Werner advised.

A PAO should be on the DoD early-entry team, typically the HAST. If a rapid-onset foreign disaster occurs and the USG, including DoD, responds, deployment may be requested within hours.

“Have a go bag! Always have a go bag, ready to deploy,” Tait also recommended.

# Conclusion

Communications and messaging are critical during humanitarian crises. Timely, accurate, appropriate messaging facilitates the host nation, affected population, and other responders understanding what the DoD is doing in support of relief operations. This understanding not only makes for a more efficient and effective disaster response, but it also builds better relationships.

Operation Tomodachi was widely viewed as a strategic success, which demonstrated the strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance and validated years of bilateral training, exercises, and planning.<sup>31</sup>

Assisting with the Thai Cave Response “helped bolster U.S.-Thai relations,” observed Castonguay. Additionally, Tait was able to leverage her well-received media presence to briefly remain in Thailand after the rescue for media engagements with the theme of women’s empowerment,<sup>32</sup> and provided positive messaging about women’s roles in the military.<sup>33</sup>

Going further back, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and large-scale response became a turning point to improve U.S. bilateral relations with several countries, including Indonesia, and influenced disaster management strategic directions in several countries for years.

Just as leaving a good impression during an international disaster response can build relations, bad messaging can resonate negatively for years. However, a solid focus on sound disaster response contributes significantly toward good optics. “Disaster management requires focus on the disaster, which usually takes care of the political,” stated Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam Public Affairs Director Chuck Anthony, based on decades of experience as Hawaii National Guard PAO and Hawaii Emergency Management Agency spokesperson.

Much has changed in the last two decades in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. During international disaster responses, public affairs personnel face the challenge of positively messaging DoD’s support mission to the host nation more quickly than ever before due to social media’s real-time reach. Social media has also exacerbated the impacts mis- and dis-information have, particularly in a chaotic post-crisis environment.

Werner concluded that it is “imperative to build relations with partners and allies with visible, promoted exercises and teamwork... We need to do all we can to reassure partners and allies through transparent, regular communication – including disaster relief.”

# Appendix

## Crisis Communication Press Conference Checklist<sup>34</sup>

### General Preparation

1. Did you mobilize resources and staff quickly?
2. Did you designate a Press Conference Site Manager?
3. Did you have a statement for Response to Query approved within 15 minutes of the incident?
4. Did you have an initial Press Release approved for public release within 30 minutes of the incident?
5. Did you establish a goal and objectives for your press conference?
6. Did you develop a draft Spokesperson(s) Opening Statement no later than 120 minutes before the press conference?
7. Did you develop foreseeable questions and answers, based on Covello's 77 Questions\* and trends from media and public queries?
8. Did you determine beforehand who would be the facilitator, and which spokesperson(s) would speak and in what order?
9. Did you schedule a murder board rehearsal with the spokesperson and technical experts no later than 120 minutes before the press conference?
10. Did you seek outside help, including volunteers if appropriate?
11. Did you notify and coordinate with the Affected State, USG interagency, and humanitarian response organizations?
12. Did you monitor and listen closely to what the news media, public officials, and other important players were saying and the questions they are asking?
13. Did you identify the news media organizations and mediums of greatest importance to your message?
14. Did you prepare and release a Media Advisory, with the 5 W's (who, what, when, where, and why) of the press conference, to include location, start and finish times, the date, a brief description of what is to be covered, names and titles of speakers, and your contact information?
15. Does the press conference timing support the news cycle? Does it support both local and national deadlines?
16. Did you prepare Press Kits with speaker biographies, backgrounders on the incident, most recent press release, relevant reports, maps, etc.?
17. Do you have personnel designated to answer phone queries about the press conference (and incident) with query forms and monitor questions trends?

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\* Refers to "77 Questions Commonly Asked by Journalists During a Crisis," reprinted at: [https://www.nj.gov/health/er/documents/77\\_questions.pdf](https://www.nj.gov/health/er/documents/77_questions.pdf) From Covello, Vincent T., Keeping Your Head in A Crisis: Responding to Communication Challenges Posed by Bioterrorism and Emerging Infectious Diseases, Association of State and Territorial Health Officers (ASTHO), 2003.

## Site Preparation

1. Do you have a prior agreement to use the site?
2. Did you select a site at a well-known location?
3. Did you designate an alternate site?
4. Is the site easily accessible by road for the news media?
5. Is there suitable parking within walking and equipment-lugging distance?
6. Did you check for a podium backdrop without distractions or backlight?
7. Are there suitable electrical outlets for news media cameras and recorders?
8. Is there adequate open space for television cameras, lights, microphones?
9. Did you provide technical support, such as access to Wi-Fi and internet?
10. Where is the media registration table? Do you have qualified people to staff it? Do they have phone or radio communications with you? Are there press kits available there?
11. Do you have a registration sheet at the table, so you can verify news media in attendance and update your contact sheet?
12. Do you have qualified personnel video and audio recording the conference?
13. Do you have designated Security Personnel or local police to safeguard the press conference site? (Check bags for explosives, keep away non-participants, etc.)
14. Are there restrooms readily available?

## Message Delivery

1. Was senior command and management involved and visible?
2. Did top management go immediately to the incident scene? (Action is Communication!)
3. Did the press conference facilitator establish ground rules and enforce them?
4. Did you stay calm? (Not lose your temper)
5. Did you practice what you planned to say to the media aloud and did you test it?
6. Did you employ Covello's CCO, IDK, 27/9/3, and other dictums as you developed the Opening Statement?
7. Did you include ground rules in the introductory statement?
8. Did you refrain from identifying the names of the injured or deceased until next-of-kin were properly notified?
9. Did you avoid statements that imply that cost is more important than public safety, health, or environment?
10. Did you avoid evading statements and shifting responsibility?
11. Did you avoid the use of technical and legal jargon?
12. Did you avoid providing too much technical detail?
13. Did you indicate that you would get back by a specific time with an answer if you did not know an answer to a question?
14. Did you avoid conjecture and speculation ("What if" questions)?
15. Did you start and end the press conference on time?

16. Did you thank the reporters for attending?
17. Did you video record the press conference? Did you provide microphones to the reporters so you could clearly record their questions, in addition to recording the Spokesperson's statements and responses?

## **Nonverbal Communication**

1. Were you sensitive to the non-verbal messages you were communicating?
2. Did you stand up straight, showing that you are paying attention and respecting your audience?
3. Did you make eye contact? (Avoiding eye contact can make you look deceitful. If it is very difficult to make eye contact, focus on the back of the room, not on your notes or the floor.)
4. Did you avoid defensive, argumentative, and unreceptive body language (e.g., arms crossed)? Did you stand with your arms straight at your sides?
5. Did you avoid fidgeting, shuffling papers, or playing with your pen? (Keeping your feet planted on the ground, sitting, or standing still will make you look more controlled and confident.)

## **Follow Up**

1. Did you answer questions unanswered at the press conference?
2. Did you post transcripts and related materials on your web site?
3. Did you monitor media coverage and correct any significant errors in reporting?

# Resources

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  - JP 3-61: Public Affairs
  - JP 3-57: Civil-Military Operations  
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