



Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Operations

In addition to their warfighting and constabulary roles, contemporary navies perform a variety of safety and support functions, including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations.

Often, the first element of a country's response to an international disaster or humanitarian incident is maritime. Maritime forces are notable for their flexibility, mobility, interoperability, readiness, sustainability, and capacity to deliver large quantities of supplies, all of which make naval forces an exceptional asset to deploy in a HADR response. For instance, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), always maintains a number of vessels at high readiness to enable rapid responses to any situation. Though a naval response can be slower to arrive than an airlift, there are several critical advantages to employing naval vessels and task forces in response to HADR incidents. For instance, a naval ship has a significantly greater capacity than even a large airplane, enabling it to carry many tons of supplies and material. In Canada, naval vessels also have the capacity to house and support personnel and equipment of the Canadian Forces' Disaster Assistance Relief Teams (DART), which can be rapidly installed on or assisted by RCN vessels.

Those vessels' capacity also allows them to serve as effective and efficient platforms by which to evacuate Canadians working or living in regions seized by conflict or a humanitarian crisis. Moreover, naval responses are not restricted or hindered by congestion in or damage to regional airports. Indeed, they are capable of launching small boats and helicopters, which are able to land onshore even if adequate port facilities are unavailable or damaged. Nor do the vessels demand the support of resources at the location of the disaster. Equipped to produce their own water, house and feed their own personnel, and transport and evacuate personnel through their own helicopters and boats, naval vessels are almost entirely self-sufficient. Critically, they do not place further strain on local infrastructure that is already coping with the aftermath of a disaster.

Naval fleets often have specific assets and capabilities that are particularly useful in HADR missions. The US Navy, for instance, boasts two hospital ships, USNS *Comfort* and USNS *Mercy*. Each containing up to 12 operating rooms, with a capacity of up to 1,000 patients, one hospital ship is stationed on the US's West Coast and the other on the East Coast. Both can deploy at five days' notice and regularly partake in humanitarian operations, typically in locations with limited or non-existent dental and medical facilities where their provision of free health services contributes significantly to naval diplomacy.

The RCN's replenishment vessels have also, historically, fulfilled a key role in the fleet's HADR responses. For instance, HMCS *Protecteur* participated in a HADR mission in East Timor in 1999, while HMCS *Preserver* deployed to Somalia as part of Operation *Deliverance* in 1992. While the RCN has since retired both of these vessels, MV *Asterix* is filling the fleet's capability gap on an interim basis, continuing the RCN's ability to transport vast quantities of disaster relief stores and

cargo. The two Joint Support Ships that the National Shipbuilding Strategy will deliver to the RCN will further enhance the fleet's ability to respond rapidly and effectively to HADR operations.

With these capabilities, and in line with Canada's humanitarian image on the world stage, the RCN has participated in numerous HADR deployments in recent decades. For instance, it deployed to Florida and the Bahamas in the fall of 1992 to aid relief efforts following Hurricane Andrew, and its vessels dispatched to support the US Gulf Coast after it was ravaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. More recently, the RCN participated in Operation *Hestia* in 2010 in response to the 7.3-magnitude earthquake that claimed thousands of lives in Haiti and caused serious and widespread damage. Within 48 hours of the earthquake, and under 27 hours after receiving the Warning Order, a task group composed of HMCS *Athabaskan* (with a helicopter detachment) and HMCS *Halifax* departed Halifax, equipped with hundreds of tons of disaster relief and humanitarian equipment and supplies, as well as around 500 soldiers, sailors, and airmen and women. The US Navy's USS *Carl Vinson* also set sail from Norfolk, brimming with personnel, support stores, and helicopters, and, with its shorter distance to travel, arrived in Port-au-Prince less than 72 hours following the earthquake. Thus, while the responding militaries and governments decided and planned the details of their responses, their relief was already en route. As the RCN vessels proceeded with their five-day trek to Haiti, their teams organized their efforts and prepared to exercise the host of non-traditional and traditional skills they estimated would be of use in the HADR response.

Upon their arrival, and as the HADR operation expanded in its scope and breadth, the ships and personnel of the RCN performed command and control of their naval humanitarian aid teams. By participating in technical support, general labour, force protection, and light engineering duties, they directly supported the disaster relief and humanitarian aid operation, in addition to providing medical aid, distributing or supporting the distribution of disaster relief and humanitarian supplies, and producing and delivering water. The vessels also offered support, transport, and lodging to the Canadian Forces and government personnel responding on the ground in Haiti. While damage to the airport facilities at Haiti's Port-au-Prince airport, and the airport's incapability to accommodate the number of large planes transporting material aid, produced congestion at the airport and hampered the delivery of airlifted aid, the responding naval forces did not encounter the same difficulties. Dispatching their small boats and helicopters, vessels sent their equipment and personnel teams ashore, where they contributed to security, distributed safe drinking water, constructed infrastructure like shelters and sanitation facilities, cleared roads, performed medical orderly services and medical triage, organized and distributed food, and supported the repair of crucial civilian and military equipment.¹ In collaboration with non-governmental organizations, and aided and directed by the Canadian Forces' DART, personnel from *Halifax* and *Athabaskan* thus delivered extensive and considerable aid.

Therefore, when countries like Haiti require disaster relief and humanitarian aid, much of the initial surge of aid comes via the sea. The RCN retains vessels at high levels of readiness to ensure its ability to quickly deploy to both perform and lead disaster relief and humanitarian assistance operations. While MV *Asterix* has supplemented the RCN's ability to transport disaster relief and humanitarian stores, the eventual delivery of the Joint Support Ships will further enhance the RCN's capability to provide ready, flexible, quick, competent, and useful HADR operational responses.

References

¹ See Captain (N) Art McDonald, "Earthquake in Haiti Triggers Tsunami of Canadian Relief," *Canadian Naval Review* 6, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 4-9.