



SPEECH

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Remarks by Permanent Secretary Defence Mr Chan Yeng Kit at the Opening of the Third Session of the Regional Consultative Group on Humanitarian Civil Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific on 5 December 2017

06 Dec 2017

Director Müller,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Let me begin by welcoming you all to the third session of the RCG (Regional Consultative Group). Singapore is honoured to be able to co-host this event with UN OCHA and US CFE, both of which are good friends and longstanding partners. We have worked together on several occasions in the past, and we are glad to be working with them again, as chair of the RCG for 2017.

Rising Humanitarian Challenges

It is an unfortunate fact that natural disasters and humanitarian crises continue to pose grave challenges to the global community. 2016 saw an unprecedented 65.6 million people displaced worldwide from these tragedies. The damage caused by these disasters has reached an apogee as well; In Asia-Pacific, natural disasters accounted for nearly 77 billion USD worth of damage just last year. Even as I speak, volcanic activity in Mount Agung in

Indonesia has disrupted air travel in Bali, and Indonesia continues to brace for a major eruption.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) efforts have been further complicated by the emergence of terrorism in our region. ISIS' takeover of Marawi, which was only recently recaptured by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in October, left some 1.1 million civilians without homes, food, drinking water or clean sanitation.

The increase in frequency, scale and complexity of these issues requires us to work more closely together to find more efficient and innovative solutions. Today, I will briefly lay out two key areas that I believe we should work on to strengthen our ability to deal with such crises. First, tapping technological innovations; and second, strengthening interoperability and mutual trust.

Tapping on Technology for HADR

Technology can be a key force multiplier in HADR. For example, the ability to harness and sense-make the vast amount of data available over the internet and other sources can drastically improve the effectiveness of disaster response, especially in areas such as needs assessment and management of humanitarian supplies. Thankfully, the challenge of sorting through such massive quantities of information is now surmountable with the use of data analytics tools that can be adapted for disaster relief operations. The Micromappers open source platform, managed in conjunction with the UN Standby Task Force, is one such initiative. During the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, this platform enabled 3000 online volunteers to analyse over 200,000 images and 50,000 tweets, creating maps of the damage and the location of where humanitarian groups were deploying. This is just one way that Humanitarian Technology, or as we call it HUMTECH, can improve our collective HADR efforts. We have thus put together a HUMTECH panel for this year's RCG Session, and look forward to the sharing of new possibilities on how militaries and civil agencies can exploit technology for HADR.

Singapore has long believed in the importance of technology as a powerful enabler in HADR efforts. Since its founding, the Changi RHCC has employed technology, such as its OPERA

Computer Information System to facilitate military-military HADR coordination in the region, including during our deployment to Nepal during the earthquakes in 2015.

Strengthening Interoperability and Mutual Trust

But, technology alone is insufficient. Effective disaster response ultimately relies on the effective coordination and cooperation among the various humanitarian organisations in theatre. Mutual trust and interoperability form the foundation for this, but it cannot be built overnight. Militaries and civil agencies have to build stronger ties and come together more frequently for exchanges and exercises to strengthen our multilateral responses to disasters.

A key aspect of Singapore's efforts in HADR has thus been aimed at strengthening this foundation. To this end, we designed the Changi RHCC as an open, inclusive and flexible platform that allows multiple organisations to work together and enhance practical cooperation. This has resulted in a network of International Liaison Officers and linkages with operation centres around the region. These partnerships have been useful in enhancing our collective responses to disasters. Again, during the Nepal earthquake in 2015, we were able to tap these linkages to help each other. For example, to help ferry a French UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) officer into theatre, as well as facilitate the delivery of the Bruneian aid package.

The Changi RHCC also organised Ex Coordinated Response (COORES) this year, which brought civilian and military humanitarian practitioners from across the Asia-Pacific and Europe together in a series of HADR Table-Top Exercises. The exercise served to keep linkages warm, while keeping a common understanding of each other's roles and operations during humanitarian crises. This is also why we are committed to working to regional initiatives like the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group on HADR. The Changi RHCC was proud to have supported the 2016 ADMM-Plus HADR/ Military Medicine exercise under its ambit. A total of 18 countries - the ASEAN plus eight of our regional partners - were involved.

The Changi RHCC hopes to continue fostering such interoperability and trust with our regional counterparts, whether it is with regional partners such as the AHA Centre, or with civilian authorities, or with NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations). In particular,

Singapore is appreciative of the support and trust placed in us by our friends and partners throughout our 2017 chairmanship of the RCG.

Conclusion

Such partnerships are essential as they will bring knowledge, capacity and expertise to bear on the enormous challenges at hand. There is clearly still scope to improve civil-military coordination in humanitarian response efforts, and I hope that the discussions at this forum will generate innovative and bold solutions. I am heartened by the strong participation in this event - with more than 130 participants from 26 countries, this is an affirmation of the region's collective resolve towards this important issue. I am confident that as long as we are committed to pursuing a broad, collaborative approach to HADR, the Asia-Pacific's humanitarian responses will be more effective and our people safer.

Thank you very much.

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