



CRISIS RESPONSE IN SRI LANKA



02

01
Members of the PACOM Augmentation Team salvage items from a schoolhouse following the crisis.

02
A crowd gathers at the shocking site of a landslide that leveled a village.

03
Villagers gather to survey the damage as they wait for flood waters to recede.

04
Following the crisis, schools were used as a prime location to account for families.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS

The PACOM Augmentation Team responds to crisis after floods and landslides ravaged Sri Lanka in June 2017.

BY JANICE BURTON

In May 2017, the southwestern monsoons proved to be particularly heavy. Coupled with a cyclone, which brought more water into the area, the affected areas faced severe flooding and mudslides. Within hours, people lost all they had, many lost their lives. More than a half a million people were affected by the deadly storms, with more than 200 people dying and an additional 79 missing.

Sitting in the embassy in Colombo, the PACOM Augmentation Team comprised of one Special Forces Soldier, three Civil Affairs Soldiers and two Psychological Operations Soldiers started making plans to assist their host country. The Civil Military Support Element, comprised of the Civil Affairs Soldiers, took the lead on behalf of the PACOM Augmentation Team. The CMSE in Sri Lanka leveraged their far-reaching network of government officials, military leaders, UN and non-governmental organizations in the relief community

to effectively parallel disaster response vis-a-vis regional powers like India, Pakistan and China. This rare opportunity allowed a tactical element to help the Department of Defense and State Department achieve strategic objectives and reaffirm U.S. Government status as a partner of choice.

Within hours of being notified, the team began leveraging all of the U.S. Special Operations assets in the country. According to the CMSE Team Leader, the team knocked out six months' worth of work in a three week period. The team began assessing where they could be the most effective and what they could do to best assist the host-nation forces who had already deployed to the area. Getting to the area was tough. Many of the main roads and rice paddies were already flooded. Villages were cut off with no way to evacuate. Many of the villagers did not know what was headed their way because there was not an emergency communication plan in place. As the rain



continued to fall, soil gave way and the sides of hills and mountains began to crumble, with whole villages being buried beneath the flow. It was a crisis of epic proportion.

The PAT decided to focus on the schools because they were the best way to gain accountability for families and to determine who was missing. To that end, they went to work locating the schools and doing what needed to be done to make them usable. Then they began reaching out to the villagers to let them know to come to the school for aid. The CMSE was able to coordinate with the Sri Lankan Disaster Management Center and to deconflict relief efforts with the UN Humanitarian Country Team's Sector System of NGOs organized by focus of relief by location. This aided the aggregate effort by mitigating undesired second and third order effects and preventing the duplication of efforts.

Team members reached out other Department of Defense assets in the country for assistance. As luck would have it, an annual Joint Combined Exchange Training was ongoing. The exercise is a large-scale multi-lateral event, which enabled the team to leverage the assistance of a variety of units. The PAT team linked up with the Special Forces Soldiers who were involved with the training, as well as ROTC Cadets. They also connected with their partner forces, particularly Sri Lankan Marines. Together the group began making their way through the flooded district getting to know the people, finding out where people lived, who was missing, what the people were concerned with. And they cleaned — everything. Schools, wells, hospitals — all

with the goal of getting things back to normal as soon as possible. In three weeks, the teams cleaned more than 1,000 wells and reinstated five major irrigation systems of bundts, levees and drainage canals.

The PAT, along with the Special Forces team, conducted damage and needs assessments, while the cadets and other U.S. military focused on the schools. At one school, 30 of the ROTC Cadets worked hard to get the school open as soon as possible and the children back in the schools so they could begin accounting for the people.

Standing near a bridge spanning a river that is crossed frequently by the people in the area, the team watched helplessly as debris in the flooded river swept the bridge away. They also saw the first mud slides from across the river and saw a whole mountain fall and bury the village beneath it.

For the PSYOP NCO attached to the team, one thing became perfectly clear: many of the people who died did not have to. The government had no means of emergency communication. The cell phones were not working. Working with members of the Sri Lankan Emergency Management, he began a project to ensure that emergency communication systems would be put in place to give people something they didn't have — a chance. The CMSE was able to assess the capabilities and identify gaps in procedures, personnel, equipment and organizational structure. Moving forward, the CMSE and USAID were developing programs to address the shortcomings and improve crisis response capacity with host nation partners. 

JUNE 2017

Southwestern Sri Lanka

213 DEAD

73 MISSING

700,000+
People Affected

30,000+
Homes Damaged

170,000+
Families Affected

3,000+
Houses Destroyed

21,000+
Evacuation Centers



03



04



01

Flood Response

SOF in Sri Lanka ideally positioned to provide rapid assessment and response during crisis.

BY CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER TWO JASON PHILLIPS

Persistent presence from special operations forces abroad allows Special Forces, Civil Affairs Teams and Military Information Support Teams to respond rapidly to crises, as well as provide a commander worldwide situational awareness. These small teams are often ideally positioned to provide quality observation and assessment especially in the context of humanitarian aid and disaster relief emergencies. During these high-impact events on the Human Domain, Army Special Operations Forces immediate response demonstrates that the United States is a faithful friend.

Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines was actively advising and assisting the Armed Forces of the Philippines in 2013 when Typhoon Haiyan (also called Super Typhoon Yolanda) carved a path through the region. JSOTF-P sent the first U.S. military personnel responders to the afflicted area. It also provided critical needs and damage assessments to the operational plans of the responders.⁰¹

In 2015, Green Berets training in Nepal transitioned instantly from joint combined exchange training to disaster relief when a deadly earthquake affected a major population center.⁰² The two Special Forces Opera-

tional Detachments-Alpha were training in mountaineering when the earthquake occurred, but after recognizing the extent of the damage, began helping to find survivors in hard to reach areas, such as Mount Everest's base camp.⁰³

In late May of 2017, an ODA from the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), was in the final days of a JCET when heavy rains caused severe flooding and landslides in southwest Sri Lanka affecting more than 600,000 people and killing more than 200. The rains quickly turned otherwise low volume waterways into raging torrents capable of destroying infrastructure such as in the adjacent photo taken south of Ratnapura.⁰⁴

Maj. Joseph Quinn, Special Operations Command-Pacific, already in Sri Lanka as part of SOCPAC's persistent engagement with key countries throughout Asia, immediately began planning the relief effort even as agencies outside Sri Lanka started to mobilize far from afar. Recognizing the planning, organization, and broad range of emergency response skills organic to a Special Forces ODA, Maj. Quinn coordinated with the 1st SFG(A) Command Team, SOCPAC, and the U.S. Embassy for ODA 1333 to stay and help lead relief efforts.

The ODA and Maj. Quinn demonstrated flexibility and perseverance in working through not only the analysis and execution of relief efforts, but also the



authority and funding challenges inherent in transitioning to relief efforts from JCET funding. The official request for support from the U.S. Embassy to Sri Lanka and command effort from the 1st SFG(A) were crucial to rapidly overcoming the legal challenges and funding constraints. This delivered the immediate support needed to combat human suffering while Maj. Quinn and the U.S. Country Team secured PACOM follow-on forces. Partnering with the CAT and the MIST, the ODA split into two elements and assisted in restoring essential services with the Government of Sri Lanka in re-establishing governance through

efforts such as re-opening an elementary school and rehabilitating critical drinking wells with the Sri Lankan International Committee of the Red Cross. The ODA along with the CA, MIST and the ICRC to rehabilitate 34 wells by the end of the first day, providing potable water to area families.⁰⁵

Able to operate effectively with minimal external support, the teams moved away from the population centers as additional relief forces arrived. As they moved out, they could address areas not typically traveled by foreigners and beyond the operational reach of many aid agencies. Additionally, the teams visited local district centers to conduct assessments, then they surveyed local medical facilities and possible helicopter landing zones to facilitate delivery of supplies from inbound U.S. Navy vessels.

During emergencies, relief workers and aid agencies rely on established relationships and area familiarization to limit loss of life and restore essential services. Special operations forces are unique in their ability to work with interagency, host nation and local residents to identify problems and implement solutions. As both natural and man-made crises will continue to impact the Human Domain, it is more important than ever to have an enduring global SOF presence to maintain situational awareness, minimize human suffering post-disaster and support governance in partnered nations. **SW**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chief Warrant Officer Two Jason Phillips is currently a 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) company operations warrant officer.

NOTES 01. Thomas Parker, 2016. 02. Harper, 2015. 03. Schogol, 2015. 04. Phillips, 2017. 05. Ibid.



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03

01
A Special Operations team member works with a local villager to repair damage to village well.

02
A main bridge was destroyed during the flood, making it difficult to evacuate people and move supplies.

03
SOF personnel work with the local population to get water to the affected areas after the flood.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS