

Shri Sudhir Vashudev, Chairman & Managing Director, Oil and Natural Gas Corporation delivering Key Note Address at the Inaugural Session of 'ICHL2013: International Conference on Humanitarian Logistics' on 2nd Dec. 2013



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Just as we thought we have seen out the worst of Phailin that hit coastal Orissa with minimal human loss, although the physical loss of material and infrastructure is still staggering, the devastation of Philippines caused by typhoon Haiyan has hit home hard. It has left an unimaginable and gut-wrenching trail of human loss and suffering in its wake.

Nothing brings us face to face to with the utter fragility of the human condition in a more acute manner than an encounter with the natural elements at their most destructive. And what is most agonizing is that even a week past the disaster, the affected people were largely still stranded and helpless waiting for help and support to come in. Reading the newspaper and magazine articles from the days during and after the devastation, it was routine to come across headlines that read – 'Philippines struggle for survival', 'Typhoon Haiyan survivors desperate for aid', 'aid convoys come under fire as relief operations become logistical nightmare'.

Closer home, very similar scenarios of chaos and coordination failure were played out when Uttarakhand was ravaged by floods earlier this year in June.

The 19th Edition of Conference of Parties (COP) of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has just concluded on 22nd Nov in Warsaw, Poland. Philippines made an impassionate speech on Haiyan drawing the attention of the negotiators to the plights of developing nations. However, despite an almost accepted argument that the disasters like what we witnessed in Odisha or Uttarakhand is primarily due to Climate Change, India could not derive any mileage from this conference.

Haiyan or the Uttarakhand floods are nothing new in humanity's timeless and constant struggles with nature. Even in our very lifetimes, we have been witness to quite a many of them that wreaked havoc on such epic scales – of more recent memory is the terrible trifecta of Japan in 2011 – earthquake, tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear reactor meltdown; the Haiti Earthquake of 2010 the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004.

However, every time that we find ourselves in the middle of such crisis more often than not our response and mitigation mechanisms have been found severely wanting in terms of coping with the magnitude of coordination and operational agility that is warranted to execute relief/aid and rescue efforts in the aftermath of such events.

Even as substantial scientific progress has been made around the subject of disaster prevention and management, work on the ground that reflects the reactivity of our systems tell an entire different story altogether.

And for a country of high population density like India where 55 per cent of landmass is prone to earthquakes; 68 per cent is vulnerable to drought; 12 per cent to floods; and 8 per cent to cyclones . Minor failure or shortcomings in disaster management invariably translates to large scale suffering and casualty.

And this is where, I reckon, 'humanitarian logistics' becomes a central pivot to the global discourse on crisis management and relief operations in the wake of disasters, natural, industrial and man-made.

Especially in India where the whole idea of disaster management itself within an established policy framework with clear guidelines and agreed-upon templates of execution is of recent origin, it is imperative that we devote the necessary time and invest the requisite resources to integrate the concept of 'humanitarian logistics' in the overall matrix at an early stage as it focuses on not just the speed of interventions but also the effectiveness of the flow of services and cost efficiencies of the operation.

One of the most challenging aspects during such periods of severe crisis is the 'organizing of efforts' within a very short window of time.

The first few days after a disaster essentially decides the effectiveness of the ground operations in terms of minimizing human loss, rehabilitating survivors, reaching medical aid and food supply to the affected.

According to a study done by Tomasini and Van Wassenhove in 2009, "*local communities are estimated to be self-reliant only for 48 hours, after which humanitarian organizations must be operational on the ground*".

On the other hand, executing an effective response during humanitarian crises is challenging on many counts; primarily due to the 'multi-dimensional' nature of the operation. Generally a large number of stakeholders are involved. Government agencies, army and paramilitary units, NGOs, medical units,

relief teams from various countries, international groups like Red Cross, local groups and individuals and so on.

All these entities need to be mobilized in a coordinated manner, and success of any such operation depends on how well multi-faceted issues and questions have been addressed.

Under normal circumstances many of these actors have little or no incentive to work together for a sufficient length of time, and when crisis situations bring them together it invariably demands a vision that goes beyond mere logistics to ensure a meaningful effort that seamlessly combines the capacities, capabilities and processes of the different agencies on the ground.

Beyond this, what further complicates the situation and makes the situation on the ground more chaotic is demand-supply mismatch where what is sent in as aid is often material of less priority to the people on the ground.

Disasters are scarcely funded according to their needs and this leads to an accumulation of huge pool of unsolicited donations which then further pressurizes resource management activities down the line.

Here, I would like to highlight a few points that I believe are germane to this current discussion on putting in place systems and processes and adopting practices that lend well to a mechanism that reacts well to humanitarian crises and works effectively for the benefit of disaster-affected communities on the ground.

First of all, there is a serious need to develop and share a well-defined knowledge capital based on the experiences, strategies and best practices across the leading agencies involved in humanitarian relief exercises and other local participants.

Many international agencies are almost 10-15 years ahead in the learning curve compared to the Indian NGOs who are a more recent participant in such exercises and who do not necessarily bring with them a knack or nous for humanitarian logistics. And the fact that NGOs and local units deploy the highest quantum of manpower resources to such humanitarian exercises only accentuates the need for such a move for cross-learning.

Sharing know-how, systems and resources across the board will accelerate the process of bringing the multiple stakeholders in sync and will go a long way toward streamlining efforts. Moreover, no single agency despite the best credentials and expertise in the sector can single-handedly confront the enormous challenges and logistical exigencies on such a scale.

A collaborative model with shared specialist pools and well-defined roles & responsibilities among the many participating agencies while executing on ground will also remove duplication of efforts to a good extent.

Coming to the Second point; to make humanitarian exercise successful on a more sustainable basis it is important to understand the local context and develop local capacities.

Big corporations, organizations and international agencies do not have always sufficient knowledge of the local ecosystem at the point of execution and this critical gap in familiarity often creates bottlenecks in the logistical chain that result in significant delays at crucial hours hampering aid and relief reaching the intended beneficiaries at the right time. It becomes immensely important then to have adequate local participation in relief operations.

Local efforts need to be formally integrated in executing the last-mile supply chain activities of global and other national agencies so that effective delivery of assistance takes place. A more long-term approach most possibly can be social engagement programs where corporations and big agencies can take the lead in educating vulnerable communities, through regular volunteer training and

coordination modules, about the vital facets of carrying out humanitarian relief operations. Doing this can significantly build up trust among the various stakeholders and increase the local community's ability to deal with a crisis situation.

Finally, I believe, as we go forward it is high time that our disaster management paradigm included within its ambit a strong and decisive role for technology and communication.

It would be unwise to not integrate technology as part of the mix when millions of dollars could actually just be saved by working more 'smartly'. Almost all of current day humanitarian efforts are mired in serious lapses in communication and unavailability of critical information at a central location for reference which results in grossly inefficient allocation of resources and uncoordinated action even within teams.

All of these come together to attenuate the eventual impact of the relief efforts on the victims. Management Information systems, advanced radio or satellite communication would surely establish necessary linkages across the entire operating or logistical network in a disaster scenario and prevent the introduction of avoidable uncertainties into a situation that would already be of high complexity.

Here I can confidently share my experience from the *Maharatna ONGC*, which I am privileged to lead. Being an organization which is in the business of oil & gas, a business that carries an inherent susceptibility to hazards and risks of various nature and varying magnitudes, I am painfully aware of the urgent need to have a scalable and cost-effective model of disaster management and relief operations.

However, through our experience, we have put in place a very effective and efficient Disaster Management Plan, which is designed like a tripod; comprising of strong technological footage, well-documented action plans backed by several alternatives and a robust collaborative ecosystem. The collaboration is not only with the state agencies and authorities, but also other companies operating in the nearby area.

The efficacy of the plan evolves from its regular Mock drills which bring out the lacunae and the opportunities for further engagement with the authorities as well as communities and thereby paving a path for continual improvement.

Being a responsible corporate citizen of the country, we have also contributed our bit to mitigate the pains and suffering of the victims. Just to mention, after the devastating Uttarakhand calamity in June, we immediately donated Rs 2 crore to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund and sent across our medical team to some of the affected areas.

But I believe much more remains to be done and can be done in the front of institutionalizing a workable model of humanitarian crisis management through the collective efforts of the industry in partnership with the government and humanitarian agencies in the areas of policymaking in this regard and long-term social engagement and empowerment programs at the local level. We, from the Industry, must be alive to the fact only through a concerted and collaborative effort from all stakeholders would go toward the achievement of something worthwhile and meaningful in the long run.

Everyone must make a contribution commensurate to their resources and capacities and supplement the efforts of the ones who may bring in the expertise but might not necessarily bring in a comparable level of resources or financial wherewithal.

Finally, I reckon we cannot wait till a disaster actually strikes to brainstorm logistical strategies and develop solutions. Even though every disaster has its own distinctive demand patterns and warrant unique response mechanisms to be developed, the process of addressing the challenges remains

relatively similar in all cases. We need to put in a place a scalable template of humanitarian logistics, a workable model with guidelines to effectively execute all our relief exercises.

In that context and in acknowledgement of the highly distinguished and accomplished house here comprising global as well national experts on the matter, I quite firmly believe that this Conference and the discussions herein will throw significant light and inform all the participants on the possible ways to reach that end.

I congratulate the IIM Raipur Team for this conference and their commendable initiative contributing to the national Disaster Management and Prevention efforts.

I wish the event a grand success.

Thank you.

Jai Hind!