India: The Trusted First Responder

When a giant wave of sea-water struck Chennai's Marina Beach on the morning of 26 December 2004, pulling in its wake fisherfolk and a group of children playing cricket, little did their brethren know that an entire region had been struck and that, across the Bay of Bengal, local people and foreign tourists on Thai and Indonesian beaches had also been swept away.

The Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004 was a natural catastrophe of a magnitude not experienced by humanity in recent times. It resulted in the death of almost a quarter million people and displacement of a couple of million people in 14 countries of the Indo-Pacific.

It also marked the coming of age of India's HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) institutional capacity. India not only dealt with death and destruction in its mainland, particularly in the coastal states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu as well as major devastation in its island territories of Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) islands but also provided speedy assistance to countries in south and south-east Asia including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Thailand and Indonesia. Simultaneously, India launched five HADR operations, two national and three international – Operation Madad (coastal south India), Operation Sea waves (A&N), Operation Castor (Maldives), Operation Rainbow (Sri Lanka) and Operation Gambhir (Indonesia). These involved the three defence services and the Indian coast guard – more than 40 ships, several transport aircraft and helicopters as well as more than 20,000 military personnel were deployed.

India's actions led to its recognition as a credible first responder in the Indo-Pacific region. Soon thereafter, the Disaster Management Act of 2005 was adopted by the Indian parliament providing the legal and institutional framework for disaster preparedness, mitigation and response, a three-layered structure at the national, state and district level and the establishment of a dedicated force, the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) to respond to such calamities.

The 2004 Tsunami also saw the coming together of the navies of four countries – Australia, India, Japan and the US – to coordinate the delivery of assistance in a collaborative effort that eventually evolved into the Quad.

India has handled several major natural disasters in the last few decades both in its immediate neighbourhood as well in distant lands.

In December 2014, India undertook one of its most complex humanitarian missions, Operation Neer, to supply drinking water to the Maldives after that country's only desalination plant broke down. Indian Air Force aircraft and Indian naval ships worked round the clock to supply more than 1,500 tonnes of drinking water to the Maldives becoming the first country to respond to the request from the Maldives.

In April 2015, when a massive earthquake hit Nepal, India launched a comprehensive rescue and relief mission in the form of Operation Maitri within six hours of the initial tremors. Several thousand stranded Indians and foreign nationals were

evacuated by air and land routes and hundreds of tons of essential material were delivered. Several field hospitals were set up. After the relief operations were completed, India launched a major rehabilitation and reconstruction package of around USD 2 billion for Nepal.

Following a devastating earthquake that struck Myanmar in end March 2025, India launched Operation Brahma, a huge tri-services combined with NDRF mission that supplied over 750 MT of materials and equipment including essential medicines and food aid. Field hospitals were set up in Mandalay, while engineering teams were deployed for reconnaissance and assessment of structural damage. Op Brahma was a classic whole-of-government HADR endeavour by the Government of India.

In end 2025, India provided massive support under Operation Sagar Bandhu to Sri Lanka that was hit by cyclone Ditwah. Food, equipment, medicines and other essential items were provided and more than 1000 tons of dry rations were supplied.

Beyond its immediate neighbourhood, India also responded with alacrity to requests from Turkiye and Syria when they were struck by earthquakes in 2023. Under Operation Dost, India was a first responder sending large Search and Rescue (SAR) teams of more than 250 personnel along with medical teams and dog squads to both countries as well as materials support.

In March 2019, India provided HADR to cyclone-hit Mozambique and in 2023 provided assistance to Malawi which was affected by a tropical cyclone.

Recently, on 26 June, 2026 India undertook its most ambitious HADR initiative when 30 tons of humanitarian relief materials accompanied by a 41-member team comprising experienced rescue personnel and medical professionals arrived in two C-17s to earthquake hit Venezuela.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, India supplied 300 million doses of vaccine to 99 countries and 2 United Nations entities under the Vaccine Maitri initiatives since January 2021, along with essential medicines and medical support.

For India, HADR has moved from being an episodic activity to a continuous global engagement. It is an essential feature of India's foreign and security policy that was formally enunciated in the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine announced by Prime Minister Modi during a visit to Mauritius in March 2015 which underpins India's approach to the Indian Ocean Region; it became an intrinsic part of our Indo-Pacific Vision and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) announced in 2019 and evolved into the MAHASAGAR vision outlined by PM Modi in March 2025.

India's approach is not merely reactive. It has also put in place frameworks for international cooperation in the area of prevention and mitigation through contributing towards the setting up of an international tsunami warning system as well as the launch of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). The CDRI (comprising 60 member states) works with 25 small island developing states to build disaster resilient infrastructure including schools, hospitals and homes.

By providing need-based and rapid assistance during emergencies and through its efforts to develop capacities for mutual benefit, India is seen as a reliable first responder and a force for global good.

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