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## The Military and the Earthquake

### The Military's Mission: Protecting the Populace

Historically, in addition to preparing to defend the country, Mexico's Army has fulfilled many economic and social functions. Among them are collaborating with the government to build highways in rural areas, waging health campaigns, protecting the environment, and carrying out missions of civil protection. The Navy and Air Force have also trained to protect the populace in the case of many kinds of natural disasters. In rainy season, the armed forces are commonly deployed along the coasts, organized according to two plans: the Army's DN-III-E and the Navy Plan, both backed up by the local population and internationally.

The Army, Navy, and Air Force offer preventive or reactive support to natural disaster victims during hurri-

cane season from June to December every year, or after earthquakes, such as the 1985 Mexico City quake. They have carried out special and rapid deployment operations on non-military, non-combat missions, what international military jargon dubs humanitarian missions. This is complemented with the concept of civil protection, organized as part of the National System of Civil Protection (SINAPROC), under the aegis of the Ministry of the Interior.

### Humanitarian Military Diplomacy

Troop deployment in peacetime dates back to the 1970s when, after the 1972 earthquake in Managua, the Mexican government authorized the Navy to go to Nicaragua to help. It did the same for El Salvador in the face of the

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destruction from the 1986 quake. The Army sent 665 troops in an air-and-sea bridge to Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. One of its most noteworthy efforts was the aid sent after the destruction caused by Hurricane Mitch in October and November 1998.

There have also been humanitarian missions beyond Central America. Among the most widely recognized is the help the Navy offered after the tsunami in Indonesia, where it sent the ships *Papaloapan*, *Usumacinta*, and *Zapoteco* to deliver 1 480 tons of food and medical aid. Participating in these tasks were 826 Navy personnel, who also used helicopters and military transport, required because of the logistical difficulties involved.

In addition, the Army and Navy both sent support troops to the United States when Hurricane Katrina hit the Louisiana coast in early September 2005. On September 8, many nursing specialists, cooks, and doctors, for a total of 196 soldiers, entered the United States through Laredo, Texas, heading for Kelly U.S. Air Force Base. In addition, 45 unarmed military vehicles transported 250 tons of food for the New Orleans victims. Navy ship *Papaloapan* delivered 200 tons of aid, including water, medicine, and rescue equipment, to the port of Biloxi, Mississippi.

Another very important humanitarian mission was deployed to Haiti in 2010, when more than 300 000 people died in a huge earthquake that semi-destroyed the city of Port-au-Prince. Between January 13 and 30, three Mexican Air Force Hercules aircraft transported 70 tons of food to the country; in addition, four days later a loaded cargo plane went, as did two hospital ships, the *Huasteco* and the *Papaloapan*. The former took in 400 tons of aid, including eight water purification plants, drinking water, food, blankets, sleeping mats, and medical materiel. The military also transported the civilian Topos Tlatelolco (Tlatelolco Moles) rescue brigade and a huge amount of food donated by civil society through the Mexican Red Cross.

## Mexico Is Earthquake Country

The September 19, 1985 quake caused many more deaths than the two September 2017 quakes (September 7 and 19). In 1985, approximately 10 000 people died in the rubble, while last year's death toll was no higher than 500. This was due to the fact that government, armed forces, and the civilian population learned a great deal about

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how to organize to protect themselves from these events. The 1986 creation of SINAPROC was also a great help for coordinating the activities of all federal, state, and municipal government agencies.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the huge number of citizens who spontaneously coordinated to join rescue efforts to get the injured out from under the rubble in 1985 was a great lesson; it turned the general population into a fundamental actor in these tasks. Another reason why there were fewer fatal victims in 2017 is that building regulations were updated after 1985. In the case of the armed forces, more than 30 years of training its members in rescue techniques for earthquakes contributed to their organizational capability and tactical effectiveness.

## The Government and the Military: Plan Mx

After the September 7 and 19, 2017 earthquakes, the government declared 700 municipalities in the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero, and Morelos and the 16 boroughs of Mexico City to be in a state of emergency. The aim was to facilitate the coordination of several government agencies, the armed forces, international aid, and the efforts of the population, which once again participated in rescue efforts.

In the hours after the September 19 quake, after the population rapidly began to act on these tasks, the Army, Navy, and federal police, as well as the Mexico City police, implemented what was called Plan Mx. This was the first government response, designed so the military and security forces could deploy and act as rapidly as possible, coordinating with civilian volunteers who spontaneously—and without any training—were already working.

These non-military missions are both preventive, such as in the case, for example, of dangerous volcanic activity, or to help during disasters, as in this case.

After the September 7, 2017 quake, the Navy sent its Mexican Republic Navy (ARM) logistical support ship *Mon-*

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tes Azules to the port of Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, with 539.37 tons of humanitarian aid to be transferred to the distribution center and handed out immediately to homeless families in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. The ship *Usumacinta* followed, delivering 536 tons of supplies. Later, on September 27, the *Usumacinta* sailed to Manzanillo, Colima, with a pneumatic shelter for 800 people, a mobile kitchen to feed 300, and a large amount of food, medicine, clothing, personal hygiene items, disinfectant, and cleaning articles. All these products had been donated by the public in Northern Mexico to the System for Comprehensive Family Development (DIF) and the Red Cross.

On September 19, 2017, the army implemented its DN-III-E Plan, deploying 3 428 troops (men and women), as well as 15 canine teams to search for people trapped in the rubble. In the first five days after the tragedy in Mexico City, the Navy rescued 115 people alive and recovered 114 bodies. They also helped build emergency shelters and food and medicine donation centers. One thousand three hundred ninety-eight Navy personnel participated through naval sanitation brigades, the Navy Infantry Corps, and Search and Rescue Teams for Collapsed Structures (BREC).

## Government, the Military, And the Population

Mexico learned a great deal between 1985 and 2017. Thirty-two years ago, the population acted in a disorganized way, but with great moral fortitude and spirit of solidarity. The government did not have appropriate institutions to coordinate activities and was surprised at the public's activism. On that occasion, there was even a great deal of friction between the military and the population. The desire to impose order on rescue efforts sometimes seemed like "martial law" and was rejected by the populace.

In September 2017, things had changed. Many of the existing protocols functioned successfully. The government not only did not obstruct the population, but it opened the doors much more rapidly to international solidarity, and the military; although it tried to create "order," it did not impose it, since they understood the dynamic of solidarity of the citizenry that once again was participating decisively. The military could not intervene around some very sensitive issues. For example, a large number of schools were damaged, and they could not prevent the children's relatives from leading the rescue efforts.

A telephone survey on September 24, 2017 by the *Reforma* daily newspaper showed that 79 percent of respondents thought they were better prepared for the emergency than in 1985. However, only 56 percent thought that the government was also better prepared. The civilians doing solidarity work received the highest approval rating (94 percent), followed by the Navy (86 percent) and the Army (85 percent). However, governors, Mexico City's mayor, and the country's president did not rate high, an expression of the citizenry's complaints about their administrations.<sup>2</sup>

The military's public assistance efforts consisted of rescuing survivors from the rubble, distributing food, and emergency medical care. But, normally, they withdraw a month after these kinds of tragedies, just as the civilian population and international cooperation do.

The work that follows with the civilian population falls to government institutions. The "post-tragedy" efforts (reconstruction of damaged homes and buildings, and offering loans and support for those left homeless and living on the street) is not a function of the military, but of governments. So, the harsh criticism of the public in this stage of reconstruction does not extend to them. ■■■

## Notes

1 For more information on this, see SEGOB, "¿Qué es el #Sinaproc y cómo se consolidó en nuestro país?" <https://www.gob.mx/cenapred/articulos/que-es-el-sinaproc-y-como-se-consolido-en-nuestro-pais-enterate>. [Editor's Note.]

2 Rubén Aguilar, "Una primera evaluación: gobernadores, Mancera y Peña Nieto no salen bien evaluados en su actuación ante los daños causados por los sismos," *Animal político*, September 26, 2017, [www.animalpolitico.com/blogueros-lo-que-quiso-decir/2017/09/26/una-primer-eva-luacion/](http://www.animalpolitico.com/blogueros-lo-que-quiso-decir/2017/09/26/una-primer-eva-luacion/).