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MEMO FROM BEIJING

Quake Revealed Deficiencies of China's Military

By JAKE HOOKER

BEIJING — They were 19-year-old farm boys wearing cloth shoes and carrying rucksacks, soldiers of the People's Liberation Army, responding to a national emergency.

They marched into the mountains, with shovels tied to their backs. They cleared rocks the size of houses from blocked roads, with ropes and brute force. They crawled over piles of bricks and concrete, listening for human sounds.

“In order to save people buried under rubble, many soldiers' hands were cut and bloodied, and they kept their hands moving,” Hu Changming, a Defense Ministry spokesman, said at news conference in May.

After the May [earthquake](#) in southwestern Sichuan Province, China sent about 130,000 troops from the army, navy, air force and the Second Artillery Corps scrambling into the mountains in China's broadest deployment of its armed forces since it fought a border war with Vietnam in 1979.

It was a gritty, hands-on effort, unfolding under the clear view of the public and the news media, and it offered analysts the best chance to assess the performance of the People's Liberation Army in a crisis since the nation's rising economy started pumping tens of billions of dollars into the military. It got good marks for public relations domestically, but the effort left some veteran P.L.A.-watchers underwhelmed.

James C. Mulvenon, a specialist on the Chinese military at the Center for Intelligence Research and Analysis, a government contractor in Washington that performs classified analyses on overseas military programs, said the earthquake showed the army's best and worst sides. It mobilized quickly, but the troops were unprepared to save lives in the first 72 hours, when thousands were buried under toppled masonry and every minute mattered.

“You basically had a bunch of guys humping through the mountains on foot and digging out people with their hands,” Mr. Mulvenon said. “It was not a stellar example of a modern military.”

In an online forum hosted by the state-run People's Daily, Zhang Zhaozhong, a prominent defense analyst, said that specialized units like the Marine Corps, the 38th Army Corps of Engineers and the engineering division of the Second Artillery Corps understood how to rescue survivors from beneath collapsed buildings. But he acknowledged that the overwhelming majority of the deployed forces, ordinary combat troops, had little if any rescue training.

The army had about 100 helicopters ferrying food, supplies and medical teams into the remote mountain areas and rescuing the injured, said Dennis J. Blasko, a former American Army attaché in Beijing. “The management of aircraft and helicopters operating in the area is probably the largest extended operation of its kind the P.L.A. has ever conducted,” he said.

But Mr. Blasko and other experts said that because the military did not have heavy-lift helicopters, vital equipment like excavators and cranes had to be brought in on roads obstructed by landslides, slowing the pace of the rescue operations.

Shen Dingli, a leading security expert at Fudan University in Shanghai, said the military's response did not reflect well on the military's preparedness for a potential war with, say, Taiwan, the independently governed island that China claims as its sovereign territory. China's air force deployed 6,500 paratroopers to Sichuan, but only 15 ended up dropping into the disaster zone, military officials said, because of bad weather and forbidding mountain terrain. Mr. Shen called the effort too little and too late.

"The air force should have been able to get troops into Wenchuan in two hours," he said, referring to a county near the quake's epicenter. "It took 44 hours. If it took them 10 hours, that's understandable. But 44 hours is shameful."

Allan Behm, a former official in Australia's Defense Ministry, said the Chinese military was evidently still focused on conventional warfare rather than engineering skills. In spite of its efforts to modernize, Mr. Behm said, "the P.L.A. is still built on the idea of bringing hundreds of thousands of troops into the battle area."

China has often deployed the P.L.A., along with a separate paramilitary force, the People's Armed Police, to respond to natural disasters, social unrest and other domestic security issues. Tai Ming Cheung, a senior fellow at the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation at the University of California at San Diego, said that in addition to preparing for a possible conflict with Taiwan, China was "focused on projecting power inside its borders, to ensure social stability."

In January, P.L.A. units from southwestern China's Chengdu Military Region were deployed to southern areas hit by heavy snowstorms. In March, they were transferred to Tibetan regions of western Sichuan to pacify antigovernment protesters. Then, in May, the earthquake hit, and they came down from the Tibetan plateau to rescue people buried under collapsed buildings.

The range of the military's recent missions, and its stated mission to support national construction, national defense and disaster relief, experts say, suggests that the military is still searching for its role.

Some Western analysts say that Beijing's willingness to accept aid and rescue teams from several foreign militaries reflects a new openness in a military that has historically operated behind a heavy cloak of secrecy. The military's top commanders held news briefings in Beijing to discuss the work of the troops in the quake's aftermath, and many analysts said they thought it was the military's first such event.

Beijing asked the Pentagon's [National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency](#), which operates spy satellites, for high-resolution images of regions affected by the earthquake. China also used 15 of its own satellites to gather information, according to Eric Hagt, director of the China program for the World Security Institute in Washington. It may have asked for satellite images expressly to demonstrate its willingness to work with the international community, Mr. Hagt said.

It all stands in sharp contrast to the military's performance after the last major earthquake, in Tangshan in 1976, when it refused all foreign aid in an effort to keep the scale of the disaster secret.

Chinese and Western analysts agree that the military's lack of heavy-lift helicopters and transport aircraft created the most serious bottleneck in the early days after the May earthquake. Troops had poor communications, they said, and did not have immediate access to surveillance imagery to help them make decisions.

"They were visible everywhere," Mr. Hagt said of the soldiers, "but the actual achievements of the mission were far less admirable. How many more people they could have saved with the proper equipment, technology, know-how and training is hard to know."

So far, the official death toll is almost 70,000. One Chinese reporter, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals, gave an indication of how many more might have been saved.

He said he traveled overland with a group of P.L.A. soldiers to the town of Yingxiu, near the earthquake's epicenter. He said that they got there at dusk, about 48 hours after the quake had hit, and that thousands of victims remained buried under collapsed buildings, including more than 200 students at the local elementary school.

Eight hundred injured people had been brought to a clearing, waiting to be evacuated by helicopter. But by noon the next day, only about 10 had been evacuated by air, the reporter said. Many died there in the clearing, waiting to be rescued.

The town had only one electrical generator, and the troops had no power tools. At the Yingxiu Primary School, the soldiers dug with their hands. Some children could be heard singing under the rubble, the reporter said, presumably to keep their spirits up.

A day later, he said, the singing stopped.

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