

Military Aid to Civil Authorities (MACA) in the Context of Pandemic Response: Lessons from West Africa

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Abstract

In 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, calling on governments to take immediate steps towards halting its spread. In response to the scale, severity and devastation that characterized the pandemic, many countries initiated measures against the disaster, such as the imposition of quarantine, isolation, as well as the restriction of movements among others. The COVID-19 pandemic was also framed as a security threat at the national and global levels, which necessitated the cooperation between the military and civilians, within the framework of military aid to civil authorities. What constitute military aid to civil authorities? Under what conditions have the military been deployed in aid of civil authorities in West Africa? What key lessons were learnt from the use of the military in aid of civil authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in West Africa? This paper examines the nature of civil-military relations as a vehicle for responding to pandemics in West Africa. It argues that the COVID-19 pandemic presented a major opportunity for cooperation between the military and civilian authorities in their efforts towards responding to the human, national and regional security challenges posed by the pandemic in the West African region. Though, the responses were largely national in design, the contagious effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, was one in which transnational cooperation amongst members of the West African region, under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States, presented a real case of regional coordination and solidarity for effectiveness and efficiency, which this paper seeks to understand and highlight.

Keywords: *civilians, military, security, COVID-19, pandemics, West Africa*

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Introduction

Across the world, in response to the covid-19 pandemic, leveraging on the logic of a whole of government approach to emergency response (Bollen & Kalkman, 2022), the military was deployed in aid of civil authorities in response to the humanitarian impact of the pandemic, which had huge human and national security risks. The key assumption here is that as civilian authorities get increasingly overwhelmed in the design and response of emergencies, the deployment of the military becomes a critical necessity, based on request from the civilian authorities. For instance, with the declaration of covid-19 as a global pandemic, China, where the pandemic started, reportedly mobilized over 10,000 military personnel, while France triggered Operation Resilience to respond to the outbreak (Kalkman, 2021). The support ranged from the transportation of medical supplies and patients, the deployment of medical logistics planners, the transportation of healthcare workers and the disinfection of hospitals and other public spaces.

In West Africa, measures were initiated against the disaster, such as the imposition of quarantine, isolation, as well as the restriction of movements among others, which necessitated cooperation between the military and civilian authorities, deliberately undertaken to achieve a common goal, containing the pandemic. Such engagements by the military generated mixed reactions as it relates to the fact that as a disciplined, trained, and equipped institution, its primary duty is to defend the territorial integrity of the country against external aggression (Ogele, 2022; Aboluwoye, 2019). Some scholars argued that the frequent use of the military to settle internal disagreements exacerbates violence, which manifests in the form of human rights violations (Enyiazu, Madueke & Mbaegbu, 2022).

Attempts have been made to address the concerns associated with the violation of human rights by the military (Olofin, 2019). For example, the creation of Civil-Military Relations (CMR) by the military, typifies

attempts by the military to improve its relations with the civilian population, with the goal of reclaiming its tainted image through improved communication and coordination. The logic here is that positive civil-military interactions are critical for rebuilding trust and strengthening national and regional security architecture.

Though MACA is viewed as a necessity when the civilian authorities are unable to effectively deal with an emergency situation, there are clearly defined preconditions or principles that it must meet. This is to do with the four criteria (Bollen & Kalkman, 2022:82) highlighted below. (i) the expertise and capabilities deployed by the military has no civilian alternative; (ii) the military is available in time to meet urgent demands; (iii) they are controlled by civilian; (iv) deployment is temporary and limited in scale towards meeting certain objectives – political, military or humanitarian.

Conceptual Clarification on MACA in the Context of Pandemic Response

Across the world, responses to the Covid-19 pandemic were first viewed from the perspective of a civilian responsibility to protect civilians from a health-related danger. Within the civilian community, there is a growing recognition of the fact that military assets and resources are required to compliment the efforts of civilian authorities in emergency response. While emergency response has been regarded more as a core civilian function, the deployment of the military in aid of civil authorities has proven to be the cornerstone of civil-military relations.

Military Aid to Civil Authorities (MACA) is a term explaining the deployment of defence resources in response to request for support from department of government (Millar & Lane, 2020). This request can be prior to or during an emergency. In this

sense, government department is obligated to formally invite the military in areas of emergency beyond its capacity. Ideally, the use of fire arms is not part of the original framework of MACA. Troops are only authorized to use fire arms when there is outright or potential threat. However, the use of fire arms in MACA operation is rising among advanced countries partly on account of global fight against terrorism. For example, in Australia, the shortage of ammunition and limited number of police force necessitated the extreme dominance of the military in emergency situation (Lee, Adams, Campbell & Emerton, 2018).

MACA is a reflection of the support or assistance provided by the military to civilian authorities, when called upon by the civilian leadership. Such assistance is largely in recognition of the expertise, experience, coordination and swiftness in containing emergencies. It has to do with the range of support provided by the military, as a result of an event, either natural or human-induced, whose severity or magnitude overwhelm the capability of local and state authorities to respond (United States Department of the Army, 1993).

Operationally, request for military support has to be clear and precise, the receiving department has to indicate its inadequacy to address the problem, has to also prove that it has limited resource that is incapable of finding immediate solution; and that mutual support would be discounted. Indeed, advanced countries have laid down procedure for civil authorities on how to request defence support which can either be a top down or a bottom up request. At the top down dimension, following an emergency situation, government department tenders its request which the ministry of defence considers, authorizes and ultimately deploys central troops. While at the bottom-up level, troops are deployed, as the ministry of defence, considers request from the government department and authorizes request at the sub-ordinate level as event unfold. It is necessary to note that the consideration of request by ministry of defence is to check whether it is inconsonance with the defence

policy and to limit political implication during intervention (Millar & Lane, 2020).

The Military's role in Curtailing the Spread of COVID-19 in West Africa

The surge in covid-19 cases across the globe has redefined the responses of West African states. Expectedly, the services of the military in these states were engaged to minimize the danger of the disease and to maintain order within their territorial borders. As approaches of civil institutions became inadequate in slowing down the spread of the virus, soldiers were drafted to ensure observance of COVID-19 protocol (Nina, 2021). The role of the military was at a time to primarily complement the duty of the police in the enforcement of COVID-19 related restrictions. It provided security cover to medical personnel who were at risk of mob action during testing and treatment of the disease (Langa,2020). However, the military was perceived not to have operated professionally throughout its engagement. There was maximum use of force against noncompliant citizens, which violated fundamental rights of the people and tainted the image of the military before the civil society (Okech, Mwambari & Olonisakin, 2021). Notwithstanding, some armed forces in West Africa fared well during this emergency period and were more professional as well as more effective than others. It thus suggests that every military involvement presents unique role to this endeavor. Here only six specific situations drawn from both French speaking and English-speaking states of the sub region are considered, largely based on the author's personal monitoring and tracking of the involvement of the military in containing the Covid 19 pandemic across the selected countries.

Anglophone West Africa (Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria)

The Ghana Armed Forces (GAF) has played a major role in the containment of covid-19 pandemic. The military notably under

the auspices of ministry of defence committed its resources and services toward the curtailment of the national emergency. In effect, personnel of GAF were deployed to enforce public compliance of lockdown, especially in Accra and Kumasi. Their duties were not limited to lockdown enforcement, but were also responsible for the provision of security cover to health personnel designated for contact tracing. Thereafter, the 37 Military Hospital, which attended to covid-19 victims was built by the military whose medical corps provided medical support and expertise. Besides that, the military was highly responsible for the aerial transport of covid-19 logistics (Odoom, et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the larger role of GAF and civil-military relations became strained as a result of the high-handedness of lockdown measures and military indifference to elitist violation of covid-19 protocol (Ibrahim, 2020).

In Sierra Leone, due to the looming spread of covid-19 pandemic in West Africa, President Julius Maada Bio obligated the military on the enforcement of travel restrictions. Thereafter, the armed force has helped in the swift transportation of medical resources (Kalkman, 2020). The early decision taken by government on travel restriction and the lessons learned from the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) made the role of the military to be widely recognized and commended by the people (M'bayo, 2023).

By March 27, 2020, the government of The Gambia declared a state of public health emergency under section 35 of its constitution which obligated the government to take necessary measures to curtail emergency situation (Nabaneh & Bah, 2022). To reduce the possible spread of the virus, the military was deployed to ensure observance of restriction measures such as physical distancing, closure of schools, places of worship and public gatherings (Lowe, et al., 2021). The Gambian troops have not experienced serious resistance from the people in public gatherings, except for the disregard of restriction measures on religious gatherings. Some Gambians affirmed that prayer is the only way to solve any problem (including covid-19) in the world (Jaw & Ebere, 2021).

The Nigerian military has played essential roles in managing health outbreaks or epidemics (Ayemoba, et.al., 2022). For example, The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in severe morbidity and mortality since its inception in December 2019. In Nigeria, the government established the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 to coordinate resources, with the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control leading the public health response. The Nigeria Ministry of Defence Health Implementation Programme (MODHIP), in collaboration with the US Army Medical Research Directorate - Africa/Nigeria, quickly responded to the pandemic by establishing a public health emergency operations centre to coordinate the military response in support of national efforts.

MODHIP adopted the World Health Organisation incident management system model to run the Public Health Emergency Operations Center (PHEOC) and coordinate COVID-19 response (World Health Organisation, 2022). This was the first time the Nigerian military used such a framework to respond to a public health emergency. The incident management system comprised five central functional units: management, operations, logistics, plans, and finance/administration. Some Ministry of Defence responses under MODHIP and PHEOC include risk communication, infection prevention and control, laboratories, case management, research and surveillance. For example, Joint surveillance teams consisting of military and state health officials conducted active case searches and contact tracing for suspected COVID-19-infected persons.

The National Disaster Response Plan (NDRP) sets a mechanism and framework for the systematic, coordinated, and successful delivery of federal aid in response to any significant disaster or emergency proclaimed by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011). The NDRP establishes fundamental policies, planning assumptions, operations, response and recovery actions, and federal agency and private sector responsibilities. It organises the types of federal response assistance that a State is most likely to require under

13 Support Service Areas (SSAs) (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011). Each of these has a designated primary agency. It focuses on interagency and intergovernmental emergency preparedness, planning, training, exercising, and coordination.

As captured by the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the military's involvement in this plan is to support Nigeria during a severe or catastrophic disaster and civil unrest and outline their responsibilities and roles in conducting Rapid Impact Assessments (NEMA, 2011). The scope of military support operations is vast, as the military is recognised as a supporting agency to most other support services. Therefore, the primary purpose of the military support service is to prioritise all requests for help and assign available resources based on mission priorities outlined by the Emergency Management Division.

The Nigerian Defence Headquarters maintains substantial resources for federal disaster response, intervening when other resources are lacking and not impeding their primary mission. The Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) oversees national military support requests, appoints a Disaster Response Unit (DRU), and resolves issues. The DRU manages military support requests at the Disaster Field Office, validating requirements and assigning liaison officers. The CDS may establish a Joint Task Force (JTF) or Response Task Force (RTF) to manage military activities for significant disasters. The JTF handles natural disasters like floods, while the RTF deals with chemical or biological emergencies. JTF or RTF commanders control military assets, supply aid, and coordinate response missions. The DRU assists mission coordination and validation, liaising between the Emergency Response Team (ERT) and JTF/RTF staff.

Francophone West Africa (Senegal, Togo and Niger):

Like the military of the English-speaking West African states, the armed forces of French speaking states of Senegal, Togo and Niger played unique roles in the containment of the global pandemic.

With the partial enactment of lockdown measure, the government of Senegal authorized its armed forces to ensure compliance to night-time curfew across the country. The operation of the military within the period of curfew restrictions was carried out through the framework of international human rights. There is high commendation on its involvement methodology. However, violent protest occurred in June 2020 in Dakar. Significantly, the government eased the tension associated with the protest and stability was achieved.

In Togo, Defense and Security Forces were authorized to enforce curfew and to ensure the management of Togolese which was expected to mitigate the spread of the pandemic. The military has used excessive force in dispersing crowd and overreacted in the curfew enforcement (Magnetines, 2022). This outright violation of human right has compelled its citizens to take to the street on April 23, 2020 demanding accountability of government given the military mismanagement of covid-19.

From outset, the strict public health control measures through the military in Niamey (Niger) have curtailed the transmission of the pandemic from Niamey to other regions (Naal, et al., 2020). However, local communities were highly critical of the military's swift response to the pandemic without commensurate measures at stemming the volatile security situation in the country. Citizens have criticized the military especially for allowing the proliferation of armed non-state actors. The volatile situation is characterized with draconian activities of these actors such as enforcement of compulsory tax on livestock and extortion for security cover (Mahamane, 2020). Thus, the local dynamics and the enforcement methodology of each military alongside its government determine the outcome of any intervention. For instance, Senegal's military was more responsive to the will of its citizens than Togo and Niger respectively.

Key Lessons from MACA in the Context of Pandemic Response in West Africa

The Covid-19 pandemic was not the first time the military was involved in pandemic response in West Africa. During the Ebola outbreak in 2014 -2016, the military was directly involved, in terms of the provision of logistical support to the civilian authorities.

- Adopt a whole of government approach to pandemic response: in a adopting a whole of government approach in responding to complex emergency, such as the covid-19 pandemic, governments across West Africa were able to provide a strong point, to the effect that interorganizational efforts, if well-coordinated will provide for the effective and efficient management of emergency, compared to a single organization approach where by the civilian authorities undertaken such a mission, without soliciting the assistance or cooperation of the military, vice-versa.
- The expertise, capacity and experience of the military makes it a critical actor in emergency response: The military proved to be a key player in emergency response due to the expertise and logistical capabilities it possess, which was not readily available to the civilian authorities. For instance, countries heavily relied on the logistical capabilities of the air force for the timely movement of covid-19 related resources, at moments when the restriction of movements due to lock-down were in place.
- Normatively MACA is a critical necessity, it operates outside clearly defined guidelines and principles: Across West African countries where MACA was seen, in the context of response to the covid-19 pandemic, there were no clearly defined guidelines and principles for their operations. In this context, issues relating to the observance of human rights and international human rights laws were not given attention, with specific

focus on how violations by military personnel should be addressed in terms of access to justice for victims.

- Over-militarization and human rights violations contributes to poor civil-military relations: The inclination to over-militarize emergency and disaster response activities frequently results in human rights breaches. When military personnel are extensively deployed in such instances, there are risks of disproportionate use of force, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and other violations, which damages the legitimacy and efficacy of response efforts, thereby weakening prospects for good civil-military relations. Across several countries, the military personnel were given orders to restrict movements, which resulted in cases of extra-judicial measures taken against civilians, manifesting in the form of corporal punishment, sexual and gender based violence among others.
- Strong perception of mistrust of the military by the civilian population: Civilian perceptions of military involvement in emergency and disaster response can also be limiting. Some people may regard military action with scepticism or distrust, considering it an infringement on civil liberties or a sign of deteriorating security conditions. Other times, opposing opinions are reinforced by records of military abuses and human rights violations during military emergency responses. Such impressions might stymie cooperation and collaboration between military and civilian institutions, jeopardising overall response operations. Recipient perceptions on aid delivery.
- Perception on roles mismatch: The mismatch between armed forces' roles in emergency and disaster response, and their levels of training and preparedness is a significant restriction, particularly for those the civilian

population, who view the role of the military more from the perspective of national defence and use of force. For the civilian population, their direct encounter with the military has been in the context of the military's involvement in military related operation as evident in the counter insurgency or terrorism operations, combating banditry and other forms of organised crimes, or coups that resulted in the truncation of civilian democratic governance. In this sense, the issue of role mismatch became a defining feature of civilian perception of the MACA.

Recommendations

- ECOWAS and its member states should partner with civil society and development partners towards the design of standardized regional and national policy framework or guiding principles on the involvement of the military in the delivery of emergency related responsibilities, which falls within the frame of MACA, with focus preparedness and deployment of the military in aid of civilian authorities. By so doing, there will be clarity regarding the extent and nature of working relations between the military and civilian authorities in the management of emergencies, which will in turn, bolster civil-military relations.
- Experiences across countries where the military was involved in the provision of assistance to civil authorities revealed a strong need for training on human rights and humanitarian law in the context of emergence response. This specialized training should be part of curriculum for the military in order to ensure adherence to human rights and international humanitarian law in the context of MACA.
- ECOWAS and its member states should ensure

that overall goal of MACA is one that is designed and implemented to meet humanitarian, as against military or political goal. In this sense, the deployment of resources – in all spheres, should be undertaken based on the ultimate goal of complementing and supporting the government's agenda of saving lives and alleviating human tragedies, as well as create a stable operational environment for other humanitarian actors to operate, as against a situation whereby the MACA results in the militarization of the public space, which in turn becomes an obstacle in the delivery of emergency related service or enforcement of policies as pronounced by the civilian authorities.

- Civil society should upscale its efforts with respect to creating awareness about military involvement in emergency and disaster response. This would be achieved through supported for the military in the area of designing robust strategic communication between the military and civilian communities, in addressing concerns, build trust and establish confidence, all geared towards bolstering citizens' involvement in decision-making processes in the management or response to emergencies.

Conclusion

The involvement of the military in the fight against covid-19, from the perspective of MACA represents a strong testimony of commitment by the military and civilian authorities to collaboratively address human and national security threats, using the core principle of a whole of government approach. Though, MACA exists in the constitution or other policy documents of states across West Africa, the covid-19 pandemic was an opportunity for its operationalization, which afforded both the military and civilian authorities to come face to face with the reality of its effectiveness or otherwise, in

addressing complex emergencies, in a region with an unfortunate history of military involvement in politics and governance that was defined by the excessive use of force. As it stands, the military is the only institution with the requisite skills, expertise and human resource that can swiftly be deployed in emergency situation in West Africa. The implication here is that the success of any form of response to national or regional emergency, would rest on a strong and robust civil-military relations as a guarantor for the effectiveness and efficiency of MACA.

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