

Weather-Related Disaster Diplomacy

by Ilan Kelman*

“Hurricane Katrina Reconciles Cuba-U.S. Differences” blazed one newspaper headline. Another shouted, “North Korea Pledges ‘a Nuclear Free Future’ After International Drought Aid Saves Millions”. In reality, however, disasters have rarely yielded durable conflict resolution. Instead—in most cases—the memory of assistance and humanitarianism fades away while politics-as-usual dominates.

Yet interest continues to grow in the notion of “disaster diplomacy” (see <http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org>), which explores how and why disaster-related activities do or do not induce international cooperation among countries or communities in conflict and produces scientific results on which disaster and conflict-related policies and practices can be based. Disaster-related activities refer to both pre-disaster efforts, including prevention and mitigation, and post-disaster actions, including response and recovery.

All disaster diplomacy evidence so far suggests that disaster-related activities can catalyze diplomacy but are unlikely to *create* diplomacy. In the short-term (on the order of weeks and months), disaster-related activities can affect diplomacy, as long as a foundation already exists for the reconciliation. That foundation could be formed, for example, by secret negotiations between enemy states or by formal or informal cultural and trade links. Over the long-term, though, non-disaster factors have a more significant impact on diplomacy than disaster-related activities. Leadership changes, mutual distrust, belief that an historical conflict or grievance should take precedence over present-day humanitarian needs, or priorities other than conflict resolution and diplomatic dividends are examples of non-disaster factors.

Throughout all disaster diplomacy work, weather-related activities have been prominent and indicate a variety of outcomes, from disaster-based diplomacy successfully catalyzing longer-term peace to disaster-related activities having no impact on conflict resolution. Three types of case studies have been covered that



A house on Upolu, Samoa that was damaged by Cyclone Heta in January 2004. (Photo by Ilan Kelman)

provide examples of the links between diplomacy and weather:

- A specific geographic region or country, such as North Korea’s roller-coaster international relations following floods, droughts, and famines that started in 1995
- A specific disaster event or type of disaster, such as the successful management of the 1991–1993 drought in southern Africa, which occurred in the context of rapid and significant political and developmental changes across the region; the drought diplomacy efforts prevented the drought emergency from becoming a drought disaster
- Disaster-related procedures and policies—for example international cooperation in identifying disaster casualties after a major cyclone—that could apply to any geographic region or disaster event or type

The main lesson is that one size doesn’t fit all in disaster diplomacy. More background and depth are needed for any case study in order to understand how disaster-related activities could be applied to foster peace—and when that application could backfire.

Therefore, in studying disaster diplomacy, we also investigate the theory and trends that emerge from compiling and comparing these case studies, seeking to explain how

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governments and others choose different approaches in devising disaster-related activities to support or inhibit diplomatic processes. In categorizing disaster diplomacy case studies, we have analyzed the influence of the proximity of the countries involved in disaster diplomacy, their aid in relationships and interactions, and several other factors.

A prominent example of weather-related disaster diplomacy between Cuba and the United States was first described by NCAR’s Mickey Glantz in 2000 (see http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org/cuba_usa.html). Glantz focused on pre-disaster activities, highlighting the scientific and technical cooperation that sometimes takes place between the two countries. Although that cooperation is particularly for hurricane modeling and monitoring, other aspects of weather science are included as well. Glantz noted that this cooperation had little influence on the diplomacy between the two countries—and was perhaps successful because the science occurred below the

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diplomatic and political radar. Glantz also used a severe drought in 1998 in Cuba (the worst to hit the country under Fidel Castro's leadership) to illustrate the level of animosity between the two countries. Cuba asked for international assistance but refused any aid from the United States, arguing that the American trade embargo contributed to Cuba's need for assistance as much as the drought. Meanwhile, the U.S. government was in no rush to assist, considering that the disaster might destabilize Castro's regime. Yet the drought was one influence among many that led to a 2000 trade agreement between the two countries.

In November 2001, Hurricane Michelle became the worst hurricane to hit Cuba during Castro's reign. The U.S. government offered aid. Castro declined, asking to pay for the American supplies instead. The United States was averse to this arrangement. Diplomatic wrangling also took place over whether Cuban ships or U.S. ships should transport the goods. Although an agreement was eventually reached, it was based on the 2000 trade agreement meaning that Hurricane Michelle did not create new U.S.-Cuba cooperation but did affect previous initiatives.

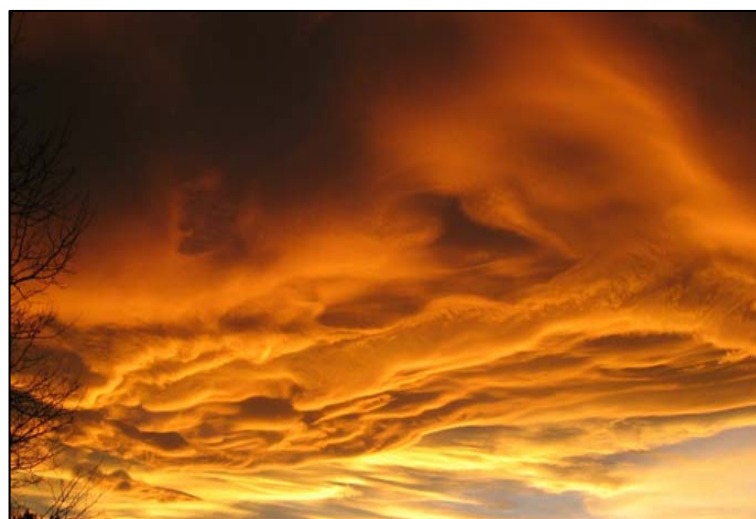
Then in July 2005, Hurricane Dennis hit Cuba. The U.S. government offered aid. Cuba said thank you but declined, opting instead for Venezuelan assistance. An opportunity for Cuba-U.S. rapprochement appeared and Cuba snubbed it. In August-September 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the United States. Cuba offered assistance, especially doctors and medical supplies. For several days, the U.S. State Department did not acknowledge the offer. Then, the offer was acknowledged but not accepted. An opportunity for U.S.-Cuba rapprochement appeared and the United States snubbed it by not accepting Cuba's offer of assistance. Finally, in October 2005, Hurricane Wilma hit Cuba. The U.S. government offered aid. Cuba said yes, and then attached conditions and the aid offer was withdrawn. Yet U.S. supplies reached Cuba in response to Wilma, but again as part of the 2000 trade agreement, again illustrating that disaster-related activities can build on already-existing connections, but rarely create new rapprochement.

Why have Cuba and the U.S. found it so difficult to come closer together? The answer is the basic politics of power in that the enmity further bolsters the power base of Castro and of many anti-Castro politicians in the United States. The diplomatic dancing around weather-related activities—punctuated by non-weather events such as 9/11 and the Elián González affair—reflects the fact that neither government wants long-term reconciliation because that would harm their political interests. For hurricane disasters, that means that either country accepting post-hurricane aid from its (perceived) enemy could be interpreted as a loss of face and victory for the other side. Thus, political self-interest can supersede humanitarian imperatives.

Absence of evidence, however, is not evidence of absence.

A successful example of new Cuba-U.S. diplomacy based solely on disaster-related activities may yet emerge as we research history or observe future events. However unsuccessful disaster diplomacy appears to be for Cuba and the United States presently, anything can happen with the mixture of people, politics, and weather. The same applies to all other case studies around the world. No proof has yet been found for new and lasting diplomacy based only on disaster-related activities. Yet it could happen. And then maybe headlines such as "Peace From the Ruins" and "Disaster Mitigation Averts War" might become reality.

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Cloud cover creates a vivid sunset near Boulder, Colo.
(Photo by Emily Laidlaw)

Conferences & Announcements

7th Annual Meeting of the European Meteorological Society (EMS) & 8th European Conference on Applications of Meteorology (ECAM)

Date: October 1-5, 2007

Location: Madrid

Abstract Deadline: May 25, 2007

EMS will address a wide spectrum of scientific and application topics in atmospheric sciences, while ECAM will focus on the application of meteorology for society, providing a platform where the meteorological community can exchange their ideas, results, needs, and demands, as well as present and future aims. For more information on registration, accommodation, travel routes, visa requirements, social events and exhibition opportunities, please visit <http://meetings.copernicus.org/ems2007>

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