

# Demilitarising emergencies

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## **Political inaction in response to natural climate action**

The *cold drop* has shown us the destructive force of climate change. This phenomenon is part of an environmental emergency in which two factors have converged: on the one hand, the unbridled natural action of a climate whose change we are accelerating; and, on the other hand, political inaction, passivity in front of the danger warnings provided by science, added to the blockage to undertake the necessary planned infrastructures.

Scientific evidence has been warning us that nature is sick, that it is suffering progressive ecological, climatic and energy destruction. It is the result of subjugation to policies of territorial depredation and the insatiable use of the planet's limited resources. The cold drop is the cry of the Earth that calls out to us.

However, once science has alerted us, without having made the adaptations to prevent it, it is no longer a mere natural disaster. Non-intervention becomes a political, social and criminal responsibility. Those who must be held accountable are the ones who should have done something and have not done it, not the climate. And the victims of what happened have the right to know why.

## **Does anyone know what this Civil Protection System is?**

It is the specific body that, in principle, has the competence to manage emergencies. It is the backbone of public policies on civil protection and disaster intervention. According to the law that created it, its mission is to mobilise and coordinate a whole machinery of public and private entities related to disasters.

The question must be asked, where was it when the cold drop was? Because that is not what we have seen. The leading role in public intervention has been taken by the UME, **the Military Emergency Unit, when this body is only one twelfth** of the bodies that make up the public emergency system<sup>1</sup>.

An echo of this perception is the media attention given to the actions of the military compared to information on the functioning of the National Civil Protection System or whether a prevention works plan was in place. Nor has the necessary deployment of regulations and resources been seen, nor do we know who is responsible for what in terms of emergency management. The profuse dispersion of its legislative provisions (central, regional and local) contributes to the lack of operability of the established protocols.

Moreover, according to the Seventh Additional Provision of the law creating the National Civil Protection System, it must not entail any increase in public expenditure. It is surprising that it is set up without its own budget. It turns it into a body that is stillborn.

No authority (central, regional, local) has been able to show any current intervention plan. The general impression is that everything has been improvised.

Nor is there any way of finding out how and since when the competences to deal with such a complex calamity have been distributed. Nor are the tasks assigned to each of the entities allegedly involved specified. The councillor for emergencies did not even know about the emergency alert system via mobile phones. And a long etc.

*So hardly anyone talks about Civil Protection. People talk about UME. And this is normal because what they see circulating in the streets of ground zero are the vehicles, machinery and equipment driven by the soldiers. They are the ones who have the facilities, the technology, the human and material resources necessary to deal with the cold drop.*

### **Civil Protection, a constitutional right and duty of civil society.**

The cold drop has made us more aware of our vulnerability. Wellington boots, buckets and spades have become icons of solidarity. Citizens, no matter what ideology, have turned out to help. A flood of volunteers has rushed to the disaster, *rolling up their sleeves, asking "what can I do?"* A natural impulse has mobilised people of all ages and walks of life, coming from all over, to provide all kinds of services: cleaning houses and streets, distributing water and food, accompanying in distress. It is comforting, in a time of exacerbated individuality, to feel part of people who still maintain the spontaneous impulse to protect each other as individuals, in the tradition of *"Today for you, tomorrow for me"*, in defence of the common good.

This response by the civilian population is enshrined in the Constitution as a right and duty of citizens in the defence of Spain (art. 30.1). This duty is regulated in cases of grave risk, catastrophe or public calamity (art. 30.4) as a task corresponding in the first instance to civil society and not to a military body. The Magna Carta limits the role of the Armed Forces to *"guaranteeing the sovereignty and independence of Spain, defending its territorial integrity and constitutional order"* (art. 8), i.e. no explicit competence with respect to the protection and defence of meteorological catastrophes. It is well understood that in cases of emergency, civil society and the State have the right and the duty to make use of all the resources at their disposal, including (of course) those of their army and not just that of a military unit.

### **Why was the UME created?**

Franco's military dictatorship created the structure of the army as a closed society within civil society. The military with their families lived a separate life in their own spaces of housing, hospitals, commissaries, schools, sports and social clubs. Being in the military shaped a strong identity of apologetic militancy in the National Catholicism ideology of Francoist dictatorship.

To neutralise the negative effect of this anomaly on democracy, the governments of the transition period tried to construct an image of the army (especially after joining NATO) associated with external UN humanitarian missions. And, on the domestic front, Zapatero's minister, Bono, proposed the creation of the Military Emergency Unit (UME) as if the army were an NGO, which had dropped its N. The PP spokesman (a military man) in the Senate described it as a *"wasteful and pharaonic whim"*. Bono's response makes it clear why the UME was created: *"because it was necessary to improve the army's image in society"*. And so it was. The cold drop has shown how public opinion has come to accept this role of military assistance in the disaster.

## **But are emergencies a matter for the military?**

No. A quien corresponde es al Sistema Nacional de Protección Civil, constituido a tal fin. Es una entidad que integra también a la UME. Pero, es hora de preguntármolo, ¿no está el ejército solapando la imagen de la intervención en la emergencia del Estado y de la sociedad civil? Es a ese organismo al que le corresponde. Y si no se ve así, es porque el organismo que está dotado de los recursos necesarios no es Protección Civil sino la UME.

However, military status does not add any degree of improvement or effectiveness to the action. The efficiency of military intervention is overrated. In matters of warfare, history bears continuous witness to the futility of armies in resolving conflicts. Recourse to war has been shown to be nothing more than the certification of the failure of intelligence. No war has ever resolved any conflict. It only attests to the superiority of the destructive force of the victor, never to the prevalence of justice. And in civil matters, to give preference to military action would be to reverse the order of the principle of subsidiarity. In civil matters, the pre-eminence belongs to civil initiative.

On the other hand, civil society has a very large pool of human resources with well-established skills. This is true both from a quantitative point of view (because of the diversity of professional competences covered by civil society) and from a qualitative point of view (because of the excellence of the levels of scientific and technical specialisation achieved). Both perspectives reveal their fundamental relevance in the case of crisis situations. Today's emergencies are so complex that they require the multidisciplinary cooperation of many actors, linked to highly specialised professional profiles (geologists, hydrologists, engineers, architects, town planners, etc.). Situations in which the army must occupy a subsidiary position with respect to experts from civil society.

In civil society, the reason is not one above the subordinates. Rather, it is the result of a multifactorial construction, within the interaction of the professional competences involved, working in teams.

For all these reasons, all the necessary resources must be available in the Emergency Unit, which is the competent body: the Civil Protection System (within the Ministry of the Interior), interconnected with the entire administrative network of the State (central, regional, provincial, county and municipal) and the civil network of professional and citizen organisations (colleges) that can be integrated into the civil cooperation of the social emergency.

If the defence of the population in catastrophes corresponds to civil society and not to the army:

- a. It is necessary to rethink the allocation of budgets (general state, regional, provincial and municipal) with adequate resources. So far, they have not been significant. And
- b. The resources (personnel, facilities, vehicles, machinery and financial resources) currently available to the UME should be transferred to the National Civil Protection System. In other words, the M should be dropped from the UME, transferring its resources to the System's own normative and endowment deployment.

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<sup>1</sup> Civil Protection and Emergency Technical Services, Fire Prevention, Extinguishing and Rescue Services, Forest Fire Prevention and Extinguishing Services, Security Forces and Corps, Health Care Services, Emergency Services, the Armed Forces UME, emergency coordination bodies of the Autonomous Regions, Forestry Technicians, Environmental Agents, Rescue Services, Victim Identification Teams, Personnel in contact with victims and their families.

