



TECHNOLOGY

Online Relief

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By Michael Hastings

In the world of inter-national relief agencies, it's known as "the fog of disaster." Brought on by wars, earthquakes and other calamities, it's a condition that descends upon any organization trying to mobilize rapidly to help those in dire need. Getting the necessary donations to buy the right supplies and get them to rescuers on the scene can be a bureaucratic nightmare. But perhaps the Internet can save the day. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have instituted a new Web-based technology designed to cut through the confusion and paperwork of a crisis.

Developed by the Fritz Institute in San Francisco, the Humanitarian Logistics Software can track donations of money and supplies in real time, from the moment they are offered to the minute they arrive at disaster sites anywhere in the world. It is designed to avoid common snafus, such as a team in the field waiting for supplies that were never shipped. It also allows aid groups to make an instant and accurate accounting for every dollar a donor gives.

The software couldn't come at a better time. According to the World Disaster Report, 226 mil-

lion people were hit by disasters in 2002. A study conducted by the IFRC shows that the software will be able to speed up the relief process by 20 to 30 percent. "We will put it to practice the first disaster we encounter," says Jean Ayoub, director of disaster management and coordination at the IFRC. With luck, that test will come later rather than sooner.