Delivering the help people need is key

By LYNN C. FRITZ
Guest columnist

Earthquakes in Turkey and Taiwan, floods in Curacao. There are times when you cannot read a newspaper without hearing about a disaster. As the CEO of Fritz Companies, a public multinational logistics company, I often felt helpless that I could not do more to help our employees and their families after a disaster.

When I sold the company in 2001, I looked into ways I could contribute to disaster relief efforts and learned that the number of disasters has tripled over the past three decades. The number of people whose lives are affected by disasters around the world -- both natural and man-made -- has tripled to 608 million in the past year alone.

And, relief resources have not kept up with the tremendous need -- particularly to tackle the ultimate challenge of getting the right supplies to the right place at the right time -- often under dire circumstances.

This led to the formation of the Fritz Institute, which is charged with strengthening the infrastructures of humanitarian relief organizations by mobilizing logistics and technology expertise and resources from the corporate and academic communities.

Over the past year I have traveled to trouble spots of the world such as southern Africa and Baghdad. It is apparent that these people who direct disaster relief are heroic people, whether distributing food to remote villages or getting medical supplies to those with AIDS.

In Baghdad, the tremendous damage to the basic infrastructure was immediately obvious. It was disturbing to see how looting and violence interfered with the ability of NGO groups to bring supplies into Iraq and really destroyed the basics of a civil society. You couldn’t believe how Iraq’s own citizens decimated hospitals by ripping sinks from the walls or obstructing the power supply for refrigeration that protected vaccines for children. It was clear that NGOs, such as CARE, knew the local people and dealt with unimaginable obstacles when working with the Iraqis to help them keep water lines running and hospitals open.

When I meet today with Northwest-based global humanitarian groups at the University of Washington’s Evans School of Public Affairs, I will share what I learned visiting Baghdad and other humanitarian relief operations around the world -- that adopting best practices from the business world can have an extraordinary effect on their ability to get vital supplies to those in need.

At the Marc Lindenberg Center for Humanitarian Action, I am looking forward to learning about the work of these relief experts and to showing them an example of the increasing use of technology and proven commercial practices in the case of getting food and medicine to people who need it.

Fritz Institute and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) have engaged in a model for public-private sector collaboration over the past year, as we designed and donated the Web-based Humanitarian Logistics Software to help IFRC accelerate the delivery process as relief workers scour the globe to locate essential supplies and get them to the disaster site.

"This technology," says Abbas
Gullet, IFRC director of disaster management, "will ease the burden of tracking and delivering emergency supplies and free us to focus more resources on saving lives and providing direct assistance to those most in need." IFRC research shows that this software can help speed up the delivery of vital supplies by up to 30 percent.

This is one example of how corporate leaders can really make a greater difference in the lives of millions of vulnerable people by contributing their expertise and assets to help NGOs expedite disaster relief in this world of multiplying disasters.

Lynn C. Fritz is the director general of the Fritz Institute and former chairman and CEO of Fritz Companies. The institute's Web site is www.fritzinstitute.org.