

Airlift to after Christmas disaster

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The day after Christmas earthquake and tidal wave disaster with unimaginable death and destruction has frozen the world's attention to the plight of people across eleven Asian countries.

Humanitarian groups and governments worldwide are launching what could be the largest ever disaster relief effort in a race to save thousands of tsunami survivors. An international airlift is under way to ferry critical aid and medicine to places like Phuket and elsewhere, and to take home shell-shocked tourists.

Jets from France and Australia were among the first to touch down at airports in Thailand and Sri Lanka. Greece, Italy, Germany and Sweden planned similar flights.

One relief expert thinks that a massive continuous airlift - similar to the one that supplied West Berlin in the early days of the Cold War is needed.

"The magnitude of this is huge," James Lee Witt, a former chief of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency who's now a disaster-response consultant said. "It's going to take every country with means to get this done.

"Getting resources into the countries is difficult, but getting it out and into the affected area is even more difficult," he added.

Hugh Parmer, president of the

American Refugee Committee, told reporters the country where disaster strikes usually coordinates relief. "There has hasn't been much experience with multinational disasters," he said.

"In some places, too many supplies will build up. There will be bottlenecks at airports, and other places will not get enough to cover basic needs," said Parmer, who was associate director of the U.S. Agency for International Development from 1998 to 2001.

"That will gradually sort itself out. "But, given everybody's best efforts, you're going to see a lot of chaos in the next few days."

A major concern of officials in the countries is getting goods quickly to aid in saving the population devastated by the disaster.

But relief agencies have learned from experience that cash rather than goods can often spread help further.

Money in hand is proving to be a vital tool in the battle for survival, as air cargo transportation costs can often exceed purchases made in or near the affected areas.

The International Federation of Red Cross Charities (IFRC) that is spearheading relief efforts, gets a major test of its multi-year program to develop better logistics solutions aimed at getting aid where it is needed fast.

IFRC has been working on logistics solutions with The Fritz Institute - a private foundation financed by former air cargo industry leader and logistics executive Lynn Fritz.

Mr. Fritz sold his company to UPS a couple of years ago and then turned his attention to taking what he learned and earned to help others, spending over a million dollars to meld modern logistics solutions to IFRC's need to speed up emergency operations.

While relief agencies like IFRC, drawing upon private sector expertise for lessons on how to manage supplies is nothing new, use of sophisticated "just-in-time" solutions and the role of logisticians to master those systems are thought to be still years behind the private sector, George Fenton, logistics manager for WorldVision's Global Rapid Response Team, believes "many relief agencies appear to be at a similar stage in their approach to supply chain management as the commercial sector was in the 1970's and 1980's, when personnel engaged in logistics were underpaid and poorly trained. "

No doubt this most horrid world disaster will result in closer scrutiny of just how well these organizations handle logistics.

Many big air cargo resources having just weathered some of the worst economic conditions in the history of the airline business are busy once again and in some cases com-