

“Despite the fact that humanitarian supply chains are among the most dynamic and complex supply chains in the world, only a handful of humanitarian relief organisations have put the creation of high-performing logistics and supply chain operations high on their agendas”



Anisya Thomas, managing director, Fritz Institute

## HUMANITARIAN LOGISTICS:

# MATCHING RECOGNITION WITH RESPONSIBILITY

The tsunami disaster has shown that high-performing logistics and supply chain operations must be put higher on the agenda. Now is the time to act, argues Fritz Institute's Anisya Thomas

One of the notable aspects of the relief efforts following the 2004 Asian tsunami was the public acknowledgement of the role of logistics in effective relief. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, as relief goods flooded the airports and warehouses in the affected regions, humanitarian organisations struggled to sort through, store and distribute the piles of supplies while disposing of those that were inappropriate.

In Sri Lanka, the sheer number of humanitarian flights with supplies paralysed the capacity to handle goods at the airport. Downstream, relief agencies struggled to locate warehouses to store excess inventory. In India, transportation pipelines were bottlenecked. In Indonesia, the damaged infrastructure combined with the flood of assistance of military representatives from several countries and large numbers of foreign humanitarian organisations, created a coordination and logistical nightmare.

As a European ambassador at a post-tsunami donor conference said: “We don't need a donors conference, we need a logistics conference.” (*New York Times*, 6 January 2005). Similarly, a spokesman for Doctors Without Borders, in announcing their decision not

to accept any more money for the relief operations, said: “What is needed are supply managers without borders: people to sort goods, identify priorities, track deliveries and direct the traffic of a relief effort in full gear.” (*Economist.com Global Agenda*, 5 January 2005).

Humanitarian logistics, the function that is charged with ensuring the efficient and cost effective flow and storage of goods and materials for the purpose of alleviating the suffering of vulnerable people, came of age during this tsunami relief effort.

Our research has shown that despite the fact that humanitarian supply chains are among the most dynamic and complex supply chains in the world, only a handful of humanitarian relief organisations have put the creation of high-performing logistics and supply chain operations high on their agendas. Thus, while there was frustration about the lack of coordination and asset sharing in the field during the tsunami relief operations, it should also be recognised that proper coordination requires adequate preparation before a disaster. When logisticians across organisations share common processes, technologies, item classifications and vocabulary, coordination will be much more practical and even more effective.

We have found that the lack of funding

for investment in ‘support’ services such as logistics and the lack of recognition of the strategic significance of logistics lies at the root of logistics operations characterised by high employee turnover rates, fragmented technology, and a lack of institutional learning over time. For the logistics function to be a strategic asset, donors and leaders of humanitarian organisations must pay more attention to it. Simultaneously, logisticians in the humanitarian sector should find new ways to measure and communicate the relevance of logistics to the efficiency and effectiveness of their organisations.

### They don't know what we do

Each year Fritz Institute hosts the Humanitarian Logistics Conference, which brings together the heads of logistics from the largest international relief and humanitarian assistance organisations, including the UN, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and international NGOs. This conference serves as a community of practice for the discussion of emerging trends, common challenges and collaborative approaches to addressing them.

A recurring theme among many of the participants in our conference is the lack of recognition of the role of logistics, both by donors and leaders of humanitarian **p32▶**



Lufthansa

◀p29 organisations. As a back-room service, logistics is not given priority in funding, which results in inadequate funds for staff recruitment and training. More often than not, logistics is not recognised as a professional function, and there is no career track for logisticians within their organisations. The short-term contracts that many logisticians have means that there is no job security. Training, if provided, is usually on the job. There are few sector-wide training programs available for humanitarian logisticians.

As a consequence, the sector lacks a cadre of ‘professional’ logisticians in the field with a common vocabulary and understanding of the core functions of logistics, including procurement, transport, warehousing, tracking and tracing and customs clearance. A survey of 225 NGOs that provided disaster relief in Tamilnadu, India, after the tsunami revealed that less than 5% had a logistics plan or any logistics professionals on their staff, despite the fact that more than 50% had long-term development programs in the region.

What most large humanitarian organisations do possess however, are a handful of very experienced logisticians who have gained very valuable experience by solving problems at multiple disaster sites over many years. These are the veterans of the industry whose deep knowledge about the dynamics of international relief efforts is extremely valuable. With punishing schedules, innovation and knowledge of the needs of the most vulnerable, these are the people that make relief effective even in the most challenging circumstances.

Thus, during major operations, these individuals are called upon over and over again. During the tsunami, many organisations pulled their most experienced logisticians from other field locations, such as Darfur.

Nonetheless, even experienced logisticians, some with decades of experience, do not feel that their function is recognised and valued

ABOVE: A tight fit for airfreighted vehicles in the hold of a Lufthansa jet

BELOW: Loading freight into the hold of an Antonov jet



Lufthansa

exclusion of logisticians from the planning phases of a relief program.

In his article titled 'A Logistician's Plea', John Rickard speaks for many of his colleagues when he asks: "As a logistician, have you ever first learned of a new project, when the purchase requisitions first appeared on your desk? Or received a vehicle request 20 minutes before it was urgently needed? ... At best, scenarios like this reduce support functions to a constant state of 'fire fighting' - inefficient, frustrating and stressful for all concerned. At worst, project implementation can be delayed and people suffer needlessly." ('A Logistician's Plea' by John Rickard, *Forced Migration Review*, issue 18).

Our logistics survey of international humanitarian organisations participating in the tsunami relief revealed that more than half of the teams sent to assess the damage in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami did not have logisticians (based on Fritz Institute's survey of 100 logisticians from 39 international humanitarian organisations that participated in tsunami relief). As a result, in addition to the many obstacles caused by the tsunami's massive destruction of infrastructure, many of the bottlenecks in delivering goods to the affected population were not properly anticipated or planned for.

**Planning for the future**

In April 2005, the logisticians that gathered in Geneva at the annual Humanitarian Logistics Conference decided to form a professional association that would serve as a catalyst to the growth of professionalism and recognition of humanitarian logistics. Their aspiration is for logistics to be recognised as a function that provides significant and strategic value to the efficient and effective delivery of relief to the people made vulnerable by natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

Toward this end, they have made a commitment to creating a standardised training and certification program for the sector that could deliver basic logistics training at the field levels, and serve as a mechanism for the standardisation of processes and vocabulary across organisations. They have also set forth the intention to evaluate various tools and methods that would facilitate the demonstration of the value of logistics to donors and top managers. These include the creation of benchmarks and measures of the cost and performance of the supply chain and technologies that would enable the tracking of goods in the field providing real-time reports to donors.

The association created in Geneva in April 2005 included representatives from the UN, the Red Cross movement and large

improve operations, and learning internally and with others must be the strategic focus.

Establishing a community that shares and invests jointly in advancing the field can leverage each logistician's efforts many times over. However, for humanitarian logistics to find its voice and create its

**“While moving relief items to disaster sites will continue to be an important role for logistics, providing timely information, analysing that information to garner insight as to how to improve operations, and learning internally and with others must be the strategic focus”**

international NGOs including (among others) World Vision, CARE, MSF, Oxfam, Merlin, and IRC.

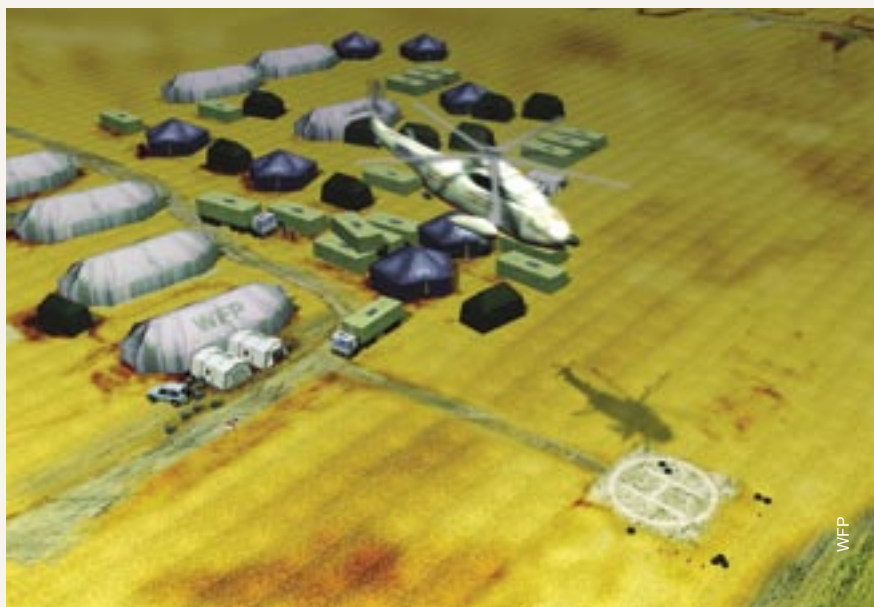
**Conclusion**

Humanitarian logistics has the opportunity to increase its contribution to disaster relief and to be recognised for that contribution by implementing initiatives in the areas of knowledge management, technology, measurement, community and positioning. While moving relief items to disaster sites will continue to be an important role for logistics, providing timely information, analysing that information to garner insight as to how to

future as a strategic and professional function, the donors to humanitarian relief and leaders of relief organisations will need to recognise its importance and invest in it. **ADR**

*Anisya Thomas, Ph.D., is managing director of Fritz Institute, a non-profit organisation that addresses the complex challenges in the delivery of humanitarian aid to people and communities in need worldwide. The institute works to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of the humanitarian sector by collaborating with the corporate sector and academic community to leverage best practices, technology and resources that can be used by all humanitarian organisations.*

**LOGISTICS NEWS**



**T**he WFP launched a humanitarian video game for children aged eight to 13. Food Force puts players in the role of emergency aid workers struggling to feed thousands on the island of Sheylan. They are confronted with realistic situations, such as negotiating with armed rebels to convince them to let the food convoy through.

“Communicating with children today means using the latest technology,” said WFP’s director of communications, Neil Gallagher. “Children in the developed world don’t know what it’s like to go to bed threatened by starvation. In an exciting and dynamic form, Food Force will generate kids’ interest and understanding about hunger, which kills more people than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined.”

The game, available for free download on [www.food-force.com](http://www.food-force.com) has been met with high demand. It is available in English and will be translated in other languages in the future.