

Logistics Role Crucial to Disaster Recovery

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Disaster response has three phases. As the Asian region affected by the December 26th earthquake and tsunami emerges from the rescue phase, the role of logistics will be even more critical to recovery and reconstruction.

Aid agencies have significantly improved their ability to respond to disasters, according to Lynn Fritz whose Fritz Institute is focused on "strengthening the infrastructures of humanitarian relief organizations." Responding with the right people and equipment to assess the disaster and immediate needs is a strength for these agencies, says Fritz. But industry reports and analyses highlight serious problems that developed during the aftermath.

The area affected was largely devoted to tourist trade or represented some of the poorest areas in the countries affected. While the lack of manufacturing in the affected region will minimize the impact on the world and regional economy, the disaster will have a lasting effect on logistics in the region. This is due in part to the reconstruction efforts, which will certainly cause a spike in demand for transportation capacity into and within the region.

Within the region, the building and construction materials industries had already been struggling to keep pace with China's booming development, says Transport Intelligence. As Thailand and Sri Lanka, the countries with the most highly developed tourism industries and reasonably developed economies, begin rebuilding, demand will rise for construction materials and consumer goods. "In the short term, there will undoubtedly be further pressure on the capacity of the region's shipping and airlines which have struggled to cope with strong demand prior to the tsunami," says an analysis by Transport Intelligence. That impact will be regional, however, and will have little effect on global transportation or logistics.

A more immediate problem for the region is the destruction of its supply chain and communications infrastructure. There is a lack of vehicles to transport relief supplies that are arriving every day at airports and seaports. Some of the military and smaller airports pressed into service for the relief effort are seeing volumes far beyond their experience or capability, according to Fritz. But even if vehicles can be found to load supplies, the lack of roads to the affected regions complicate the aid effort and have caused goods to pile up.

In some cases, aid has become politicized. Areas of Indonesia that have been the subject of internal security disputes were relegated to a lower priority for aid by the military-run operations at Banda Aceh's Sultan Iskandar Muda Airport. A civilian organization

was put in charge of the distribution, which opened up the distribution, but one challenge it faced was that the civilian administration in some of the affected regions was wiped out, so the only alternative is the military.

Most ports saw little disruption following the tsunami and were operating during relief efforts.

Charity and relief organizations were asking the general public for cash donations rather than material goods. This allowed them to locate and acquire materials within or closer to the disaster site in areas where storage and transportation could be simplified.