

Tsunami Aid Snarled in Red Tape

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Though donations to aid Asian tsunami victims have slowed in recent weeks, some relief workers aren't complaining too loudly. Relief officials are hoping the slowdown will help alleviate a substantial backlog of donations already shipped to the ravaged region. According to published reports, thousands of cartons of supplies shipped to the area following the late December disaster sit unopened at airports and ports due to bureaucratic holdups.

Up to 25 percent of the containers sent to Sri Lanka, for instance, remain unopened because of paperwork problems. London's Financial Times reports that eight containers of drinking water sent by Diageo in January remain undistributed because the Indonesian Red Cross lost paperwork when it moved its offices. The newspaper also reports that close to 1,500 containers are stacked at the Sumatran port of Medan and that 14 ambulances sent to Indonesia by UNICEF took two months to clear customs.

That's not to say relief supplies haven't been getting through. Bob Bellhouse, executive director of the World Economic Forum's Disaster Relief Network, says that the warehouses his group staffed in the early weeks of the relief effort were all emptied of aid supplies in a timely manner. And Ian Logan, operations liaison delegate for the International Federation of Red Cross, emphasizes that the Red Cross has been rela-

tively successful moving relief supplies. "There is no indication that there has been any delay in getting life-saving and life-preserving goods into the field," says Logan. "People are not dying because they are not getting medicines, or food or water."

Logan acknowledges, however, that "there has been a challenge all along in a number of the countries with the logistics of clearing the donations for use. It ... has been a problem in this operation because of the well intentioned response from around the world, which has overloaded the system." Such challenges are typical of high-exposure relief efforts, he observes, adding that the problem may not be as serious as it might appear. Although some cartons remain unopened, he says, many of them contain products no longer needed in the relief effort.

The reports underscore a problem that plagues all natural disaster recovery efforts that receive the kind of extraordinary media attention accorded the tsunami. In the initial weeks following a crisis, the system is often overwhelmed with donations. That's one reason why the Red Cross encourages donors to send cash. In the early days, in particular, monetary donations are far more valuable than unsolicited contributions of goods that may not be needed and only serve to clog the relief effort's supply chain.

The relief effort's focus has now shifted to reconstruction as aid workers start to build permanent homes for those displaced by the tsunami. Raw materials are being shipped from the United States and Australia. "It's a full supply chain now, from the raw materials' point of origin right into the construction areas where homes are being built," says Mitsuko Mizushima, chief logistics officer for the Fritz Institute, which brings supply chain expertise and solutions from private industry to benefit humanitarian efforts.