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Life-and-death logistics

Like millions of others, I've spent much of the last two weeks following the terrible news of the tsunami disaster. Some of the best reporting I've seen has been by Mark Magnier, a friend and former JoC colleague who's now based in Asia for the Los Angeles Times.

During the first days after the disaster, the news coverage naturally focused on the rising casualty toll and the stories of rescue and survivors. Inevitably, though, by last week the emphasis shifted to the logistical problems of delivering food, water and supplies to survivors.

It's a sadly familiar pattern to people like Lynn Fritz. Since selling Fritz Cos. to UPS in 2001, he has stayed busy with the Fritz Institute, a San Francisco-based organization (www.fritzinstitute.org) that he established to help relief agencies do a better job with the logistics of humanitarian aid.

Fritz has said that disaster relief is 80 percent logistics. In commercial logistics, companies deal with generally predictable circumstances and familiar service partners. The opposite is true in humanitarian-aid logistics.

In this case, the 80 percent figure may be low. Infrastructure in the Indian Ocean region was spotty even before the tsunami, and Anisya Thomas, the Fritz Institute's managing director, says International Red Cross officials tell her that this is the largest, most complicated natural disaster they've ever seen.

Thomas says the Red Cross is

using the humanitarian-aid software that the Fritz Institute developed and donated to track supplies and automate procurement from regional suppliers. The software previously was used in relief efforts after the Morocco earthquake and last year's hurricanes in the Caribbean.

Fritz and Thomas, a native of India, are in India this week to see how the relief logistics is going, to look for ways to make it better, and to solicit help from business contacts in the region. They're also looking ahead to after this disaster recedes from the front pages.

People react with generosity when news of a disaster is fresh, but then tend to lose interest until the next one comes along. That's human nature, as true for companies as for individuals.

How can logistics companies help? Thomas offers two suggestions: First, they should offer resources to experienced organizations that are doing the front-line work, instead of trying to do it themselves. Second, they should look beyond today's headlines and think about how they can offer their knowledge and products to help build logistics capacity for the next disaster.

Sadly, there's always a next disaster. Natural and man-made calamities — wars, famines, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes and more — have strained the resources of relief agencies. "That's why building humanitarian logistics capacity is so critical," Thomas says. "It can be the difference in people making it or not making it."

In other words, the difference between life and death.