

Tsunami relief lacked logistics expertise

June 21, 2005

Fritz Institute's survey on the dynamics of the humanitarian relief supply chain associated with the December 2004 Tsunami that struck south Asia and eastern Africa finds that many humanitarian organizations were challenged and under-resourced to meet important operational needs, including a shortage of logistics experts, systems to track freight and poor communications.

However, Logistics and the Effective Delivery of Humanitarian Relief found that the relief requirements from this unprecedented destruction brought the importance of logistics in the delivery of humanitarian aid into the spotlight.

This survey was conducted by Fritz Institute in partnership with KPMG and MIT, based on the experiences of about 100 logisticians from 18 of the world's largest humanitarian organizations at both headquarters and in the field.

During the early media reports, humanitarian aid staff, donors and the public were learning about the many obstacles to getting relief supplies into the countries affected by the tsunami. While many of these obstacles were due to the collapse of infrastructures in the affected region, the challenges were exacerbated by a shortage of trained logistics experts, limited automation, and a lack of access to information on the ground.

According to Logistics and the Effective Delivery of Humanitarian Relief, humanitarian organizations were impacted by the scarcity of trained and experienced logisticians in the field with 88 percent of the organisations responding to the survey having to relo-

cate their most experienced logisticians other assignments, such as Darfur, to staff the Tsunami relief efforts.

"The small number of trained and experienced logistics professionals in the humanitarian sector has been highlighted in this survey and we have found that many humanitarian logisticians are hoping that one of the key lessons from this situation is a commitment to create a much larger pool of logisticians who will have formalised training and professional certification to instil standards for service delivery and collaboration throughout the sector," says Lynn Fritz, director general of Fritz Institute.

Many of the initial assessments of the Tsunami's impact were incomplete due to lack of access to local experts. Only 38 percent of participating organisations had assessment team members from the affected area. The lack of access to and involvement of local people in the field is largely attributed to a lack of recent programs in the affected region, as well as political conflicts and government disarray, such as in Banda Aceh, where international aid organisations have been blocked from entry for some time.

In addition, only 58 percent of these organisations appeared to have involved logisticians in their assessments.

"The humanitarian community has learned that some of the bottlenecks that were not anticipated may have been better planned for by recognizing the critical role of logisticians," Lynn Fritz says. While most respondents to the survey felt that the initial relief effort was effective, only about 26 percent of

the responding relief organisations had access to software that provided track and trace capabilities to help anticipate the receipt of procured goods in the field. Most responding organisations continue to use manual, spreadsheet, or "home grown" technologies for tracking goods in the field.

"Humanitarian organisations need information technology solutions that support procurement, distribution, tracking and tracing of goods and funds through receipt in the field. We hope that the prominence of the logistics challenges in the Tsunami relief effort will motivate donors and humanitarian sector leadership to expedite their support for creating connectivity between headquarters and the field," Fritz continues. The chaos of the first couple of weeks of the relief effort was intensified by hundreds of relief agencies entering the affected region to set up operations to provide aid. Not only was the magnitude of the damage to the affected communities and people unprecedented, but the number of relief organizations offering to help and the lack of a formalized process to organize these efforts led to competition for transportation, procurement and shared coordination of relief delivery.

According to the survey, the Tsunami experience demonstrated that collaboration was successful in meeting immediate needs on an ad-hoc basis and that there is a need to focus processes and resources to strengthen centralized collaboration mechanisms between central relief actors from the humanitarian sector, as well as those private sector, military or other partners who step up to assist with a particular relief operation.