

AVOIDING LOGISTICS DISASTERS

By WILLIAM HOFFMAN - ASSOCIATE EDITOR

July 4, 2005

As money and aid flooded into nations devastated by last December's Indian Ocean tsunami in the first months of this year, a European ambassador told aid donors, 'We don't need a donor's conference, we need a logistics conference.'

A spokesman for Doctors Without Borders around the same time 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.'

The tsunami focused attention on the need for disaster logistics as never before, said a June 20 report by the San Francisco-based Fritz Institute. 'It's very gratifying to us that logistics is finally getting the attention it deserves,' said Fritz Institute Managing Director Anisya Thomas.

Now the institute wants that translated into action: it recommends creating a pool of logistics professionals who could be deployed on short notice at national and international levels. The institute also suggests developing technologies that can track and trace relief shipments, retain and transfer knowledge and experience and standardize processes.

In addition, the institute advises creation of collaboration and coordina-

tion mechanisms between humanitarian organizations and civilian and military sectors before a disaster strikes.

Thomas said the institute is working on the first two recommendations. Fritz put together a disaster logistics certification initiative for humanitarian relief workers along with six other organizations. Fritz also started development of Web-based track-and-trace software, scheduled to launch this fall, for agencies unable to use the institute's hardware-based Humanitarian Logistics Software program.

Unfortunately, the third recommendation -- more collaboration across national boundaries and other divisions in advance of a tragedy - is outside the Fritz Institute's direct reach.

More than 200,000 people in South Asia lost their lives in the tidal wave that swept hundreds of islands and thousands of miles of shoreline after a Dec. 26 earthquake. The world responded swiftly, but not, as time went on, effectively.

About 100 officials from 18 international humanitarian organizations reported shortages of logistics experts in the field, inadequate planning and needs assessments, limited coordination and collabora-

tion and primitive supply chain capabilities that hindered recovery efforts, the Fritz Institute survey found.

Fritz Institute officials weren't surprised by the logistics troubles, Thomas said, but aid donors were. Governments, aid groups and individuals didn't understand 'that back rooms are so critical to the front line effectiveness' of humanitarian relief, she said. Donors want their money spent on food, shelter and other tangible items but balk at paying for logistics. They often demand onerous and time-consuming reports that produce few performance measures other than delivery speed.

The Fritz Institute continually seeks opportunities to make the business case for relief organizations and to recruit private sector help, Thomas said. Private companies -- especially those in need of flexible, high velocity supply chain know-how -- might consider attending the institute's Sept. 8 conference at Stanford University on lessons learned by private sector and relief agency cooperation following the tsunami. 'Humanitarian supply chains are the most dynamic supply chains that exist in the world today,' Thomas said.

All content © 2005- Traffic World, Commonwealth Business Media Inc. and may not be republished without permission.