U.S. Transportation Companies Rush Aid, Expertise to S. Asia

By Daniel P. Beath
Staff Writer

U.S. transportation and logistics firms said last week they are donating expertise, manpower, equipment and money to help South Asian communities devastated by the earthquake-induced tsunami of Dec. 26, joining a worldwide effort by government agencies and humanitarian relief organizations.

A growing number of parcel carriers, third-party intermediaries and other freight companies were joining the recovery effort by diverting resources from their normal operations or handling special cargoes, even as relief agencies said the sudden demand for transport services was pushing up rates for traffic headed to the stricken region.

“We have been inundated with requests. Everyone wants to help,” said John Flick, a spokesman for UPS Inc. in Atlanta, the largest corporation in trucking on the TRANSPORT TOPICS 100 list.

UPS said it would provide $2.5 million in ground, air and ocean transportation, make a cash grant of $400,000 to several relief agencies and match employee contributions up to $100,000.

FedEx Express, a part of the No. 2 company on the TT 100 list, said its air freight operations had already carried more than 200 tons of medical supplies to Sri Lanka and Indonesia on behalf of six designated charities, including the American Red Cross, Heart to Heart International and Direct Relief International.

Officials at DHL Americas in Plantation, Fla., said that company had arranged for seven chartered flights carrying relief supplies, and offered the use of storage facilities in Jakarta, Indonesia; Singapore; and Vietnam.

Parent company Deutsche Post World Net also donated $1.3 million toward relief efforts.

As the world became more aware of how much damage the Indian Ocean tidal waves caused, attention focused from just donations to the logistical challenges of coordinating delivery of tons of food, building materials and medical supplies despite washed-out roads, broken bridges, crippled infrastructure and tons of debris.

For relief organizations in this country, getting vital supplies to where they are needed was a major difficulty, with transport officials reporting that traffic had overwhelmed local airports and port facilities in the affected region.

“There’s a lot of goods sitting at sea waiting to be unloaded,” said Alex Smith, shipping director of Convoy of Hope in Springfield, Mo.

Smith said that nonprofit organization last week sent nine ocean cargo containers to Sri Lanka and Indonesia filled with water, food and medical equipment gathered from the Midwest and West Coast.

He said ocean-shipping rates to Indonesia had risen by $700 to $800 a container because of the surge in volume moving to that region. Convoy of Hope contracts with commercial carriers to move goods for free or at discounted rates, and also uses its own fleet of seven tractor-trailers and four straight trucks.

The events drew in individual specialists as well as organizations.

Pittsburgh-based transportation consultant Satish Jindel said he planned to visit coastal regions of his native India later this month to help local officials develop a disaster-response plan. He added that his company, SJ Consulting Group, would match donations up to $1,000 made by individual employees to the relief effort.

Elsewhere, companies and industry groups were joining in other ways.

Truck manufacturer Paccar Inc., which makes the Peterbilt Motors and Kenworth Truck nameplates in the United States but sells vehicles and parts in more than 100 countries, said it was making a $1 million contribution to the American Red Cross for its tsunami relief fund.

Amsterdam-based TNT Logistics said it was working with the United Nations World Food Program, which deployed teams of logistics experts to the region and dispatched aircraft and relief supplies from Brindisi, Italy, to the hardest-hit areas of Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Thailand.

The Motor & Equipment Manufacturers Association donated $1,000 to the American Red Cross and its sister Red Crescent societies in South Asia, and encouraged its members to contribute additional money.

Besides food and medicine, the United States was providing thousands of body bags and helping distribute donated cellphones to improve communications in remote areas, Reuters reported.

The disaster also has led to a flurry of requests from relief organizations for help in automating their logistics processes, according to Aniya Thomas, managing director of the Fritz Institute.

That organization is a private foundation established by the former chairman and chief executive officer of freight forwarder the Fritz Cos. After selling out to UPS in 2001, Lynn Fritz decided to develop logistics software for humanitarian relief organizations.

“In the last two days, we’ve had 10 legitimate requests for the system,” Thomas said Jan. 4. “People are going crazy with the scale of this mobilization. They’re finding it impossible to do it manually.”

Humanitarian relief organizations coordinate billions of dollars in relief annually, but are ill-equipped to handle logistics because of high employee turnover and the unpredictability of disasters and funding issues, Thomas said.

Staff Reporter Neil Abt contributed to this article.
Finding Perspective From Tragedy

There’s nothing like a monumental natural disaster to put our concerns and worries into perspective, and to remind us how good our own lives are.

The shocking pictures and stories that have come to us from the devastated nations of the Indian Ocean, from Sri Lanka to Thailand to Indonesia and India, are almost beyond comprehension.

Scenes of coastlines stripped of houses, roads and vegetation, alternating with mass jumbles of bodies and wreckage, are testament to the natural forces unleashed by the underwater earthquake, which led to the massive tidal waves and at least 150,000 deaths.

The tragic events resulting from the Dec. 26 earthquake, the day after Christmas and as the world was preparing to usher in the new year, have obviously touched many of us.

A host of companies in our industry have stepped forward to help. And many of them are offering what may turn out to be even more valuable than cash or goods: namely, transport services to move desperately needed supplies to the region or within the region.

Indeed, more than one government official from the region has said they had already received enough material; what they needed now was a way to get it to the hundreds of thousands of people who needed the aid.

Among the many trucking-related companies, UPS, FedEx and DHL have all stepped forward with substantial donations of cash and transportation services.

UPS said it would provide $2.5 million in transport services, $400,000 in cash and would match employee donations up to $100,000. FedEx Express said it has already moved 200 tons of medical supplies for six charities to Sri Lanka and Indonesia. And DHL Americas said it has arranged seven charter flights of relief supplies and has offered the use of storage facilities in the affected region.

Cash donations have run the gamut from Pacar Inc.’s $1 million to $1,000 from the Motor & Equipment Manufacturers Association.

And an organization established by the founder of the Fritz Cos., Lynn Fritz, has provided copies of an automated logistics program to 10 organizations that have asked for it in order to improve their delivery of relief supplies.

There will be natural disasters as long as our civilization continues. It’s heartening to see our industry respond so wholeheartedly to ease the suffering of others.