

## **Emergency Relief Logistics: Combining Humanitarian Experience With Supply Chain Expertise**

By Russ Dixon

The world changed forever on December 26, 2004. That was the day that an earthquake of mammoth proportions struck, which in turn triggered a tsunami that ravaged the coastlines along the Indian Ocean. Entire coastal villages and towns from Africa to Asia were literally swept away. Millions of survivors were left behind in the wake of this devastation, having lost their families, friends, homes and communities.

A number of relief agencies quickly rallied their resources to help the victims of this natural disaster. One of them was the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations' frontline agency in the fight against global hunger, which, within a matter of days, launched a massive emergency operation.

According to those inside WFP, this disaster presented the humanitarian organization with one of its most logistically challenging operations in its 40-plus year history. WFP is the world's largest humanitarian agency each year providing food aid to an average of 90 million people including 56 million hungry children in more than 80 countries.

What made this situation more unique than others was that WFP and its partners would be working in locations where much of the infrastructure had been damaged or destroyed; where many areas are remote and cut off from normal supply lines, and where existing capacities were already stretched thin. WFP had two objectives going into the crisis: Deliver life-saving food to tsunami survivors and set-up a logistics support system that would enable them to facilitate a rebuilding operation that would be in place for months, perhaps even years.

WFP estimates it has provided food and other aid to nearly two million survivors of the tsunami. In its relief operations, WFP received crucial support from its partners to get the job done. One of those partners is TNT, which has helped with the logistics part of the project that encompassed many modes of transport, from trucks and helicopters to ships and planes. This is where humanitarian experience came together with supply chain expertise to help those truly in need.

### **Logistics Is Critical To Emergency Relief Operations**

TNT is a global mail, express and logistics company that became a leading corporate partner with WFP about three years ago. In 2002, TNT made a long-term commitment to WFP aimed at fighting world hunger. By teaming up with WFP, TNT had already committed itself to sharing its resources and know-how in order to make a lifesaving difference. Logistics is an essential weapon in the fight against hunger – and a key part of the supply chain that lies at the heart of the WFP's mission.

Using emergency operational procedures that had already been put in place, TNT moved quickly to move emergency response staff, food and other goods to assist those countries most affected by the tsunami. These logistics efforts were also supported by financial support and personal sacrifice.

More than anyone else, ordinary people really made the difference. For example, David Tan of TNT Singapore rushed to Indonesia to support relief efforts during the first weeks. “The work is hectic and very tiring. But when we see the convoys pull out at the end of the day and we hear how many people are benefiting from our work, we feel very proud to be part of the effort,” Tan said.

### **Delivering Food First In Indonesia**

Nature had unleashed destruction on the coastlines around the Indian Ocean. But within days of the tsunami disaster, TNT staff in Dubai, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand swung into action to help WFP mount relief efforts.

In Indonesia, TNT ran the first food convoys to Banda Aceh, the hardest hit area in the region. In addition to transporting food and other relief materials, TNT employees helped set up operations centers, warehousing and other infrastructure, and provided a range of support services in the affected areas. They also worked in airport emergency teams and helped offload the stream of incoming planes, moving life-saving cargo onto trucks bound for the disaster areas.

### **Rising To the Challenge**

David Stenberg, TNT’s Country Operations Director in Indonesia, reflects on a month he and his team will remember for the rest of their lives.

On December 27, David Stenberg was looking forward to a round of golf when he received a call on his cell phone. A few hours later, the UN was briefing all of its partners on a coordinated response to the tsunami. “Initially, the media were reporting casualties of 3,000 to 4,000,” he recalled. “We know from experience that was grossly underestimated.”

The amount of work David and his team did in the next few days challenges the imagination. “We were authorized by the Indonesian military to coordinate operational handling at the airport at Banda Aceh,” he explained. “We’d fly in two teams from Europe in order to turn the planes around faster and ease congestion.” Before the end of January, 35 international and Indonesian TNT staff were working full-time in tsunami-related operations, while many more contributed on a smaller scale.

David finds it hard to identify the greatest challenge his team had to address. “On balance, perhaps the hardest and most time-consuming thing was to get the daily food convoys to Banda Aceh up and running. We had 120-odd trucks, and we’ll need them for a long time to come. The team worked 14 to 16 hour days, seven days a week. Nothing was too much trouble for them; they just wanted to get the job done. I wasn’t the only one who was impressed – many people we worked for also commented on it.”

### **Communication And More Were Key**

The success of this initiative – and of the relationship between WFP and TNT – can be traced to the same core elements of business: communications, preparation and training. These were keys to TNT and WFP’s ability to work together in a trying situation.

The disaster recovery efforts were aided by the fact that the relationship was already well established, starting up two years before the tsunami hit. When key executives from both sides met in the beginning, they established relationships that would make it easy to get processes rolling when disaster struck.

Another major factor in this success was the preparation that enabled the two organizations to quickly take action. Contact lists were already in place, the lines of communications were pre-defined and everyone knew who to contact. In addition, WFP already knew what TNT could offer WFP in the event of a crisis, such as detailed information about warehouses and space availability, transportation capabilities and the skill sets available in the countries where TNT operates.

### **In Summary**

In the months since the tsunami struck, the millions of survivors have come to depend on the relief efforts of humanitarian organizations like WFP. But these efforts would fail without the aid of key partners to get the job done. The logistics partnership that the WFP enjoys with TNT is one such critical relationship, and an outstanding example of humanitarian experience coming together with supply chain expertise to provide help to people in need.

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