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What Works

Shipping Companies to the Rescue: Business steps in to help overtaxed airports in the wake of natural disasters. By Marguerite Rigoglioso

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Shipping Companies to the Rescue

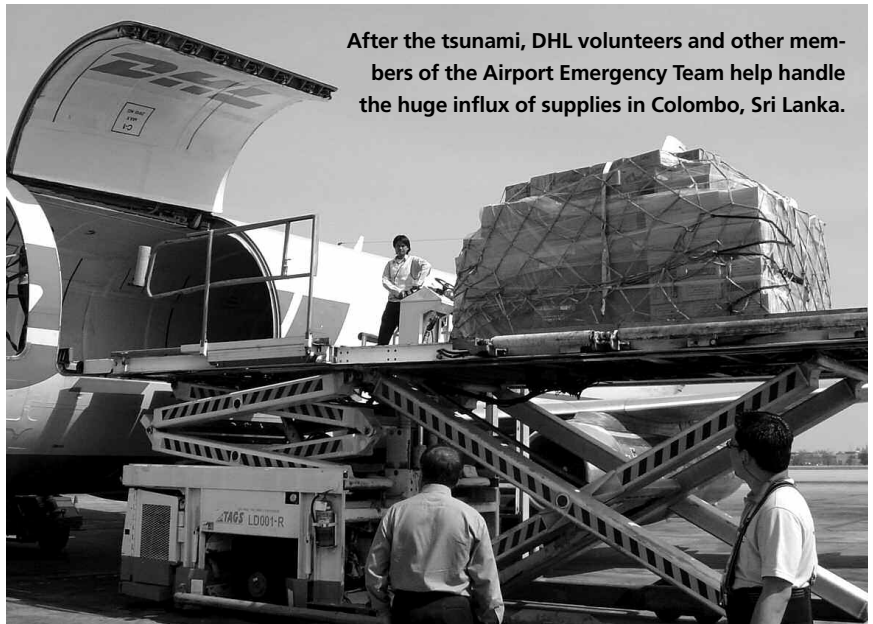
Business steps in to help overtaxed airports in the wake of natural disasters *by Marguerite Rigoglioso*

When the tsunami struck Southeast Asia in late December 2004, personnel at Bandaranaïke International Airport in Colombo, Sri Lanka, had no idea that a wave of a different sort was about to hit: 7,000 metric tons of donated supplies. Under the relentless influx of freight pouring in from around the world, the airport would have ground to a halt within days – and an already-high death toll would have risen even more sharply had it not been for the swift deployment of the newly formed Airport Emergency Team (AET).

AET is a nonprofit that was initiated by the private sector to help disaster relief flow more smoothly. The brainchild of Chris Weeks, DHL International's logistics expert, and Bob Bellhouse, senior vice president of the engineering firm Parsons Brinckerhoff, AET operates under the umbrella of the World Economic Forum's Disaster Resource Network. In the wake of natural disasters, the United Nations calls on AET to help airports handle the surge of incoming freight. The team has served as a lynchpin not only in the aftermath of the tsunami, but also following Hurricane Katrina and the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. Its volunteers, who hail from seven shipping and transportation companies, help organize the distribution of medical supplies, clothing, food, cooking equipment, and other donations.

AET is simple and focused. "Humanitarian organizations and NGOs are involved in shipping relief to devastated areas and getting it to victims," says Bellhouse. "They do a great job at that, but none of them manages logistics at airports where such supplies come in. Those of us from the business sector have determined that we can use our particular core competencies to fill this one small but important gap in a way that doesn't duplicate efforts or create more problems." By taking on this task, AET volunteers play a critical role in situations where logistical delays can cost lives.

During the last three major world disasters, Weeks and his teams of roughly 20 professionals have hit the ground running. "We reassure them [local airport officials] that we're there to help, not to take over or get in the way,"



After the tsunami, DHL volunteers and other members of the Airport Emergency Team help handle the huge influx of supplies in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Weeks notes. Adds Bellhouse, "We don't schedule flights or control airspace, nor do we coordinate pickups by local agencies." Rather, team members create a database of incoming flights and their cargo, and then arrange for freight to be sorted and moved into warehouses. From there, humanitarian organizations can easily retrieve and distribute it.

"Just to give you an idea of the scale of what's involved," says Bellhouse, "at the Islamabad Airport in Pakistan in November 2005, every two or three minutes huge helicopters were landing, being loaded with relief supplies, and then rapidly taking off [to reach earthquake victims]. This was going on all day. It was like a machine."

Among AET's fans is Ari Hewage, secretary of Sri Lanka's Ministry of Ports and Aviation. "Following the Asian tsunami," he says, "a huge responsibility was cast on my shoulders for handling relief cargo at our international airport in Colombo. The AET shouldered a major part of my duties and relieved me in a professional and expeditious manner of the onerous task of handling cargo."

A Team Is Born

As director of operations in Europe, the Middle East, and



Africa for the Disaster Resource Network, Weeks saw firsthand how the 2003 earthquake in Bam, Iran, created a secondary catastrophe in the local airport. (Weeks was on loan to the organization through DHL's corporate responsibility program.) "I was in Dubai trying to get relief aircraft into Bam, and was completely frustrated," Weeks said. "The infrastructure in Bam couldn't handle the volume of planes and supplies. The net result was that a substantial amount of aid never got to the people."

It was shortly after that experience that the idea for AET was born. "A fellow named Larry Nolan, who's worked with DHL for many years, said to me, 'In these situations, you need people like me who know what they're doing to help airport managers until things get normal again,'" remembers Weeks.

Weeks took the idea to Bellhouse, who had been granted paid time off by Parsons Brinckerhoff to serve as executive director of the Disaster Resource Network. Bellhouse was just as enthusiastic about the idea as Weeks, and in 2004 the two launched AET. They chose Dubai, a major hub for Middle Eastern and African relief operations, as the home base for the team.

Weeks then approached seven global shipping and transportation companies, among them DHL, TNT, Aramex, Dnata, and Emirates Air, for volunteer help. Some 60 overnight express personnel, forklift operators, warehouse managers, communications specialists, and computer database administrators, among others, responded. Each of these experts is available at the drop of a storm, quake, or other calamity to fly where help is needed to keep tarmacs and storage spaces from being inundated with mountains of materials.

The Tsunami Hits

The AET team had undergone only six of its eight initial training sessions when the tsunami hit Southeast Asia. "We got a call from the U.N. saying, 'You *are* ready now, aren't you?'" says Weeks. Even though they would have liked a bit more time to prepare, "We just had to go and do it."

Within three days, Weeks and 20 others found themselves at the Colombo airport. The airport had escaped the tsunami floods, but it was not prepared to handle the round-the-clock arrival of planes with relief goods. Freight was beginning to pile up and there was no comprehensive plan of how to deal with it. With only a limited amount of communication equipment and their few personal items, Weeks and his team quickly went to work.

The AET team first concentrated on assembling the nec-

essary resources: a van, shortwave radios, food and water supplies, phone lines, forklifts, pallets, lodging for the crew, information on incoming flights, covered spaces, office equipment, packing supplies, and manual labor. They also secured cooperation from Sri Lankan military, aviation, ministerial, and customs officials to begin speedily and efficiently transferring freight from incoming planes to warehouse spaces, for later retrieval by NGOs. It was 20 days before the supply stream trickled down to the point where airport personnel could handle it by themselves.

Creating Cross-Sector Partnerships

AET's initial volunteer network of 60 Dubai-based employees has expanded to 120, and includes citizens from all over the world who reside primarily in Dubai. Weeks is now back full time with DHL, but still finds time to set up two new AET teams, one based in Singapore and another that is split between Miami and Panama. Bellhouse is creating disaster-ready emergency medical and communications teams based on the AET model.

"We've all come a long way over the past five years in creating collaborative efforts between the nonprofit and business sectors," said Bellhouse. "We're finding ways to take down the walls and work together, and AET is a great example of that." Successful nonprofit-private endeavors require shared and realistic expectations, clear communications, and follow-through on commitments from both sides, he says. "You also need to make sure the organizations are matched in terms of scale," he notes. "Pairing a large corporation with a small NGO, for example, might not work, but pairing that corporation's local office with a local NGO might work well."

Such collaborations, Bellhouse says, bring value to all parties. "NGOs benefit from the contributions of the business sector, and companies enjoy brand recognition and gain learning opportunities for their managers," he says. "Personally, I've grown in my ability to work in different cultures and with a very wide range of issues and interests. Those skills will no doubt benefit my organization when I go back to working there full time."

"A number of AET members have told me that they could have given money to any of these relief efforts, but that there's been nothing more rewarding than giving five days of their lives volunteering directly," says Weeks. "Companies and individuals who give time, not just money, do much more good and get much more out of it. I encourage businesses to look at their core competencies and find a way of using them to make a difference in the world." □