

UN Joint Logistics Centre: a coordinated response to common humanitarian logistics concerns

by David B Kaatrud, Ramina Samii and Luk N Van Wassenhove

Typically, humanitarian agencies tend to underestimate the importance of logistics.

It takes only a glance at a typical humanitarian logistics planner's checklist to understand the range and depth of information required to optimise operational effectiveness and cope with the variety of bottlenecks that may hinder humanitarian response at the outbreak of a disaster. The difficulties of completing such a checklist are compounded when large-scale complex emergencies involve a multitude of actors. How many organisations in the humanitarian community are ready to meet such challenges, let alone in a cost-effective and efficient manner?

Under-budgeting for logistics management capability means that already stretched logistics staff are unable to properly compile vital information needed to adequately develop a logistics strategy. In addition, agencies may not have the skills, human resources and time to liaise, coordinate and negotiate effectively with other stakeholders – the military, host governments, neighbouring country governments, other humanitarian organisations, donors and logistics service providers.

As far as the UN system is concerned, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) may not always have the requisite technical skills for the level of logistics coordination which most emergency operations demand. The need for a specialised form of inter-agency coordination mechanism to deal exclusively with logistics issues in increasingly complex operational environments and to make the best use of limited and expensive resources led to the establishment of the UN Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC).

The UNJLC

Originally conceived as a short-term emergency response facility, the UNJLC was born out of the humanitarian response to the 1996 Eastern Zaire crisis which demanded intensified field-based coordination and pooling of air assets among UNHCR, World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF to deliver relief assistance to refugees stranded inside Eastern Zaire and to transport those returning to their place of origin. This intensified coordination was necessary for the duration of the crisis in order to optimise the use of expensive aircraft by

planning, prioritising and controlling the movement of critical food and non-food items and returnees.

Since then the UNJLC has been deployed in other large-scale disasters – the Balkans, East Timor, Mozambique, Angola, Afghanistan and Iraq – where intensified inter-agency logistics coordination was required.

Although it began in an *ad hoc* manner, the UNJLC was formally recognised by the UN's inter-agency humanitarian policy-making body in early 2002 and placed under the custodianship of WFP, the UN's largest logistics actor. Thus the UNJLC is able to draw upon WFP's extensive logistics resources to meet a wide range of logistics challenges. When deployed, the UNJLC is integrated into the UN's response coordination structure on the ground. The UNJLC is configured to support two response models: inter-agency logistics coordination only or coordination plus asset management, such as a donated fleet of aircraft.

The UNJLC approach underlines the need to preserve and respect each and every agency's logistics system. By viewing the humanitarian effort as a 'modular' system, it seeks to enhance and strengthen individual logistics systems, develop synergies across agencies and improve efficiency for the humanitarian community as a whole. For example, the UNJLC – without interfering in an agency's established air chartering arrangements – can facilitate the pooling of limited airlift capacity with the aim of matching eventual excess capacity with outstanding demand.

To best fulfil its coordination mandate, the UNJLC sets up a host of temporary satellite offices around a regional coordination office established for the duration of the emergency. Without its own permanent staff, the UNJLC depends on voluntary agency secondments. These satellite offices serve as a) logistics

A typical humanitarian logistics planner's checklist

Status and availability of in-theatre infrastructure assets, installations and services

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Airfields | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Ports & barges |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Airport off-loading equipment | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fuel depots |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Airport warehouses | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fuel |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Primary roads | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Country-wide warehouses |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Bridges | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Truck fleet |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Railways | |

Status of and accessibility to overland corridors and border crossing points

- All the above along the border crossing points, plus
- Customs clearance procedures, duties
- Visa requirements

information collection nodes and b) coordinating bodies for local, inter-agency logistics activities. Where logistics bottlenecks affecting the common humanitarian effort are identified, the satellite offices prepare and implement a collective response to eliminate the impediments. When required, UNJLC officers also help frame logistics-related policy issues affecting humanitarian logistics operations. With the disappearance of bottlenecks, the satellite offices are demobilised.

Information platform

Throughout a crisis, the humanitarian logistics planners' need for information and data analysis is enormous. No single agency in a large-scale emergency has the resources to cover vast areas in continuous evolution in terms of status of infrastructure, accessibility, availability and prices. Acting as an information platform in support of agency logistics planners, the UNJLC gathers, collates, analyses and disseminates relevant information from and among humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors. This includes spatial information in the form of GIS (Geographic Information Systems). Agencies can then optimise their activities in terms of response, cost and stock pre-positioning. In addition, the UNJLC can help avoid wasteful competition among and duplication within humanitarian organisations.

At the outset of the Afghan crisis, for example, UNJLC developed a crisis-specific website containing relevant information for logistics planners. The website became increasingly comprehensive with the systematic feedback received from site visitors. Through the website, logistics planners had immediate access to updated and reliable information on planned strategic and regional airlifts; corridor and in-country infrastructure installations and assets; transport rates; agency stock positions; contact details of the logistics personnel of the various agencies; status of corridors and border crossings; customs information; and any common UN passenger air service and commercial airline schedules.

Addressing logistics bottlenecks

Logistics bottlenecks may result from the actions of neighbouring states,

recipient governments or military forces in control of such assets as warehouses or fuel depots. Individual agencies usually do not have the resources to engage in simultaneous negotiations in multiple locations with different actors. Even if such resources were available, it would be the least cost-effective and efficient option if the issues at hand were of common concern.

By performing these tasks on behalf of the whole community the UNJLC augments the overall humanitarian logistics capability. It was thus able to streamline and hasten the transit and movement of humanitarian cargo and personnel from Afghanistan's neighbours and enter into negotiations with local customs, rail, port and border authorities on issues related to customs clearance, duties and visa requirements.

During the Afghan crisis, the northern corridor constituted a bottleneck for the humanitarian community. The Uzbek corridor, through the border city of Termez, was the only economic alternative as it had a port, rail connections and asphalted roads on both sides of a bridge over the Amu Darya

river. However, in 1998 it had been closed down by the Uzbek government. To address this bottleneck, a UNJLC operation was set up in Termez to provide a logistics interface between local authorities and humanitarian agencies.

UNJLC Termez speedily negotiated an agreement with the Uzbek authorities for the transport of humanitarian cargo by barge to Afghanistan and established a system to prioritise and schedule barge cargo. The UNJLC then focused its efforts on negotiating the opening up of the bridge for relief items and personnel. Appropriate clearance procedures were agreed with the Uzbek customs authority and surface transport resumed between the two countries. The resulting available capacity was more than enough for the planned humanitarian requirements. The logistics bottleneck disappeared and with it the need for intensified coordination. After the establishment of an efficient local inter-agency logistics coordination structure, the UNJLC Termez office was closed.

Lack of adequate storage facilities constitutes another critical and recur-



ring logistics constraint for humanitarian agencies as they move into a country or a new region. To address this, the UNJLC often brokers exchange agreements between agencies in need of storage facilities and those who have them, coordinates sharing of storage space and liaises with military or local civil authorities in possession of these assets in order to speed up their transfer to humanitarian organisations.

Host country logistics service providers are another important set of actors that can either facilitate or constrain the operational effectiveness of humanitarian logistics operations. Only a common negotiating platform can help humanitarian organisations exercise their collective bargaining power. During the Afghan crisis humanitarian agencies unknowingly engaged in wasteful competition by bidding up the price of transport to secure access to truck capacity in Herat. The cargo transport cartel resulted in a 300% price increase over a six-month period. After conducting a technical study on the Afghan transport sector, the UNJLC presented a transport price proposal intended for use by all agencies. By threatening to

bring in a UN trucking fleet in the event of non-agreement and publishing agreed rates on its website, it put an end to the price hike. Overall, millions of the humanitarian community's dollars were saved.

Need to 'de-conflict'

Humanitarian response in military environments is complicated. Security concerns usually result in the temporary evacuation of humanitarian staff and overshadow relief operations throughout the crisis. Operations in such environments create an operational dependency on bordering countries' infrastructure. Contrary to natural disaster environments, during military interventions the military often assumes de facto control of common services, assets and transportation infrastructure such as airfields, warehouses and transport corridors equally required by the humanitarian organisations. The 'de-conflicting' of humanitarian and military activities operationally dependent on the limited infrastructure calls for a 'legitimated' coordinated effort. As was the case in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the UNJLC often takes on this coordination and 'de-conflicting' role in support of UN humanitarian operations.

At the outset of the hostilities in Afghanistan the country's airspace, under the de facto control of the US-led Coalition, was closed to humanitarian air operations. After intense negotiations with the Coalition forces, the UNJLC arranged corridors for humanitarian air operations and successfully increased the number of landing spots for humanitarian cargo at various key airfields in country. Likewise in Iraq, after the conclusion of the war, the UNJLC opened up the Iraqi airspace for humanitarian operations.

An evolving concept

The humanitarian community needs to respond to the increasingly dynamic and demanding emergency operational environment by developing more timely and specialised forms of inter-agency coordination. Since its inception, the UNJLC has provided a temporary support structure to operational humanitarian actors in those emergency environments requiring intensified coordination and pooling of logistics assets, including both natural disasters,

such as the Mozambique flood response, and complex emergency environments, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The relevance of its services has ensured a high level of voluntary cooperation from the participating agencies in terms of staff (secondments) and information sharing.

Since its first deployment, the UNJLC's coordinating role has expanded to encompass various stakeholders including the donor community. For example, to help the development of a common UN strategy for the vital rehabilitation of Afghanistan's road network, the UNJLC embarked on a number of infrastructure survey projects. After assessing Afghan road conditions and traffic capacity, it helped the humanitarian community develop proposals for donor and Coalition funding. By organising rehabilitation seminars, it facilitated interaction between the parties and helped prioritise and speed up repair interventions.

The recent experience of UNJLC deployments has underscored the dynamic and flexible nature of the facility. In Afghanistan, the UNJLC supported two major non-humanitarian activities requiring considerable logistics planning and execution. As government and institutions had 'disappeared', the UNJLC contributed to the logistics operations of the Loya Jirga process that led to the election of the new Afghan government and to the currency exchange exercise involving the collection and destruction of 4,000 MT of old bank notes and the distribution of 800 million new bank-notes.

The UNJLC concept has continued to evolve, responding to new demands and learning from experience. It is taking on board the lessons learned from each crisis. It has addressed the problem of delayed deployment decisions, an issue faced during the Gujarat earthquake in 2001, through the newly established Activation Protocol.¹ To ensure the availability of sufficient start-up staff, it has conducted training sessions for agency logisticians. To date, UNJLC has run two training sessions for agency/NGO logisticians: one in Brindisi (September 2001) and one in Copenhagen (November 2002). Another two sessions are tentatively scheduled for late 2003. Lastly, to be able to run as it hits the ground, it



UN convoy in Angola.

has taken the necessary measures to ensure the availability of the minimum equipment through the establishment of standardised 'fly-away' kits.

The UNJLC is now able to provide a range of logistics coordination services from the preparedness to emergency response phase as well as assessment of existing inter-agency logistics coordination mechanisms for on-going emergency operations. As it continues to establish itself, the UNJLC's principal challenges relate to:

- properly diagnosing the logistics situation to identify the most appropriate UNJLC response and ensuring that all concerned parties are fully aware of this role
- being careful to avoid the trap of 'coordination for coordination's sake' and striving to provide added value in the overall logistics response effort of a given emergency
- being sensitive to the absorption capacity of agency logistics staff and designing its information management and dissemination structures accordingly. In this regard, the UNJLC must recognise that in the emergency context inter-agency data is imperfect and information management is rarely well structured. Emphasis will continue to be placed on developing new information management techniques and technologies in support of logistics planning functions.
- giving due attention to explaining its role clearly to all stakeholders at the field and headquarters levels (being a relatively new emergency response mechanism, the UNJLC's mandate is not widely understood)
- making every effort, after deployment, to obtain continual feedback from its main users on the most appropriate services, information and assistance they require from the UNJLC.

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1. The Activation Protocol provides a guideline for the inter-agency consultation process leading to the activation of a UNJLC (whether it is required, its size, duration, resources required, mobilisation procedures, etc.). More info on the guideline is available at: www.unjlc.org/home/core/download/UNJLC_Concept%2018_Feb_2003_AnnexD_Activation.pdf

This article and the following article on the IFRC draw on the following INSEAD case studies:

by *Ramina Samii and Luk N Van Wassenhove*:

- 'The United Nations Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC): The Genesis of a Humanitarian Relief Coordination Platform', INSEAD case study 02/2003-5093.
- 'UNJLC: The Afghanistan Crisis', INSEAD case study 02/2003-5092. www.fritzinstitute.org/images/FI.pdfs/UNJLC%20afghanistan.pdf
- 'Logistics: Moving the seeds of a brighter future (UNJLC's second year in Afghanistan)', INSEAD case study, 2003.

by *R Samii, L N Van Wassenhove, K Kumar & I Becerra-Fernandez*:

- 'IFRC - Choreographer of Disaster Management. The Gujarat Earthquake', INSEAD case study 06/2002-5032.
- IFRC - Choreographer of Disaster Management. Preparing for Tomorrow's Disasters', INSEAD case study 06/2002-5039.

