

# Logistics under pressure: UNICEF's Back to School programme in Afghanistan

by Paul Molinaro and Sandie Blanchet

*For the last eighteen months in Afghanistan, UNICEF has been involved in one of the largest education operations in the history of the organisation.*

The first stage of the Back to School (BTS) programme sought to enable 1.78 million children in the war-ravaged country to return to school by the end of March 2002. Since then, an additional two campaigns have been undertaken, reaching 1 million children in September 2002 and 4.5 million in March 2003. The evolution of these operations has had three main effects:

- It has raised the profile of the logistics profession within UNICEF. The organisation now recognises the need to further strengthen its in-country logistics operations.
- It represents a new approach to supply and logistics operations in general, by recognising that such operations can be an important and useful vehicle for building local capacity and assisting national institutions in making the transition from emergency to development. This also helps to prepare those same institutions for coping with future emergencies, where supplies and logistics will always be a huge element in response planning.
- It has shown that large-scale education interventions can be an immediate element of an emergency response, and not be limited to post-crisis reconstruction. In Afghanistan, the response to restart education for all was one of the first interventions led by the Interim Administration and the international community.

## Genesis of the BTS operation and early errors

Initial planning began in early December 2001 and was inevitably a challenging experience in light of the

complexity of the local situation and of the operation itself. At this time the war in Afghanistan had only just ended and the new transitional government had not yet been agreed upon. UNICEF staff were also in the early stages of deployment. The first logistics staff arrived in Pakistan on 1 December to be confronted by the more pressing issues of providing nutritional, health and winter supplies, and establishing logistics systems to move and monitor them. Critical elements of the procurement section, the education section and the nascent logistics sections were all operating separately; information flow - within and between the Afghan office and the support offices in New York and Copenhagen - was restricted, hampered not least by the lack of reliable and available communications in a country with little infrastructure.

UNICEF Supply Division had to identify, procure, assemble, pack and distribute thousands of educational kits for children living in a country where the human and financial resources and infrastructure had been seriously weakened by years of war. Looking at the volume of supplies in question it became obvious that UNICEF was facing one of the most daunting challenges it had ever faced and was clearly confronted with major difficulties in dealing with the magnitude of the operation. Ten thousand boxes, providing teaching/ learning materials for 800,000 children, were flown in from the UNICEF warehouse in Copenhagen. But it was far from enough. It was also apparent that the supplies being ordered from Pakistani suppliers would not be sufficient to cover the requirements - which were constantly changing due to uncertainties about the numbers of Afghan schoolchildren (starting at around 1 million then jumping to 1.5 million,

then to roughly 1.8 million). By the end of December UNICEF faced a two-and-a-half month deadline (for a 23 March school opening) to receive, pack and distribute the supplies. Based on supplier promises of a six-week lead time for delivery, UNICEF planned to begin operations on 15 February against a distribution plan that had yet to be written, with data that was not readily available, and implemented by human resources and a logistics infrastructure that were still being developed.

## Staffing

In January the country office had only two logistics personnel in place, one in Islamabad as coordinator, and one in Peshawar, on the Pakistan/Afghan border. UNICEF was drastically in need of extra personnel. However, when the new government announced that Back to School would be one of the pillars of its reconstruction programme, the operation took on an immediate political dimension. UNICEF made a public commitment to providing the necessary supplies before 23 March 2001 and immediately deployed senior staff to the field. The BTS operation reshaped itself, taking on a stronger logistics focus and requests for resources originating from the logistics office now carried far more weight.

The senior human resources apparatus in New York that covered South Asia was temporarily relocated to Islamabad to facilitate and expedite recruitment for BTS. By mid February, BTS Logistics had recruited 11 logistics officers who between them had had field experience in almost every major complex emergency since Bosnia in 1992.

## Distribution planning and Nowshera logistics base

The first priority was to develop a distribution plan that, though complex, was coherent and easily



Nowshera packing centre

understood. For the purposes of planning, education programme officers had no real distribution data to work with except a 1999 UNESCO survey. Planning was therefore finalised by taking the 1.8 million student figure that UNICEF had actually procured for, and dividing this figure by the population percentages for each region, thus giving us an idea of how many kits were needed where. For language breakdown UNICEF sought local expertise and settled on an average Dari/Pashto percentage split for each province. This was a critical element for text book distribution. For teacher numbers UNICEF took its student figure and divided by 35 and for schools it worked on a figure of 1 per 70 students.

The first key element in the distribution network was the establishment of a major logistics centre where bulk supplies could be received, packed into kits and dispatched. A packing centre was established in the North West Frontier Province town of Nowshera which belonged to the National Logistics Cell (NLC), a government organisation staffed by Pakistani military officers and civilians. NLC subcontracted all labour (guards, packers and loaders) as well as catering services. Workers were employed on two shifts, the shop floor supervised by warehouse staff flown in from Copenhagen. In less

than two months, the Nowshera warehouse produced 50,000 educational kits at a rate of two boxes per minute. In addition, smaller warehouses in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan produced over 10,000 kits, 400 recreational kits and 600 school tents.

### Kit design

UNICEF's Education section provided the original list of items that were to be given to students, teachers and schools. Logistics section translated these lists to 'kit form' and were given leeway to change items or item numbers in order to make the exercise logistically feasible. A generic Grades 1-6 kit was designed so that this could be prioritised in order to meet the 23 March deadline, as well as the Teacher and School kits. Any specialist components would follow later. This made the task logistically possible. In addition to the kits, UNICEF procured some 6 million textbooks to be distributed simultaneously. These were made up of 86 different titles in two languages and including Teacher guides.

### Distribution

The hubs in this case were Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad and Kandahar, locations with UNICEF offices, logisticians and warehouses.

Each hub covered a number of provinces and received total kits for the combined provinces. In general, UNICEF supplied transport from hubs to drop zones but this was not always the case. In Kabul, peacekeeping personnel from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) were used to ferry to drop zones and to individual schools. In Mazar-e-Sharif, the United Nations Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC) organised helicopters to drop zones. Beyond drop zones, UNICEF provided cash either to district education officers or to UNICEF-hired distribution assistants. This cash funded transport by smaller vehicles, private cars, donkeys and porters and also allowed UNICEF to set up some 250 small storage facilities at district level. In other areas of Afghanistan UNICEF was able to work with NGOs, such as the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan. In each case, mode of transport was left to the logistics officer at the hub. With Afghanistan being so geographically diverse, a 'one mode fits all' system was not attempted.

### Problems encountered

#### Procurement:

1. Issues arose over the quality of some supplies procured locally, due to the short lead-in times and the high volumes being requested.
2. Local suppliers were often optimistic about delivery dates, causing frequent stock-outs on the packing lines and forcing UNICEF to take urgent measures, such as hiring additional aircraft to transport delayed items from nearby countries.
3. Supply lead times were underestimated on some occasions.

#### Distribution:

Afghanistan was still in an emergency phase and it was the end of winter. The infrastructure (both human and physical) had been destroyed by years of war. The logistics involved in distributing the kits embraced technological extremes - from aircraft and helicopters to taxis, wheelbarrows, donkeys and porters. Hundreds of trucks were used to transport the kits to Kabul for onward distribution to provincial centres. UNICEF staff were in daily contact with almost 100 suppliers and manufacturers to track progress and identify problems. Thousands of health workers involved in the national immunisation network were mobilised to help distribute kits. Countless obstacles were encountered: obtaining exemption

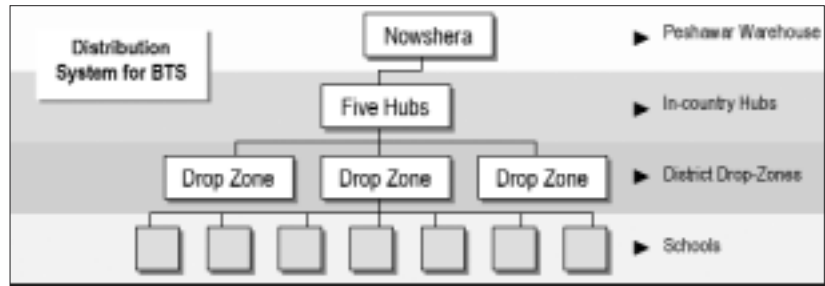
certificates; getting customs clearance on time; negotiating demurrage and port storage charges; flooded roads; identifying local focal points and ensuring that they were ready to receive the supplies and simultaneously coordinating operations in several countries.

### Capacity building

One of the objectives of BTS was to help build capacity in Afghanistan's Ministry of Education. In July 2002, UNICEF identified a disused and badly damaged former industrial centre that already belonged to the Ministry of Education and had been the centre for school furniture production. UNICEF spent \$50,000 on rehabilitating what is now called the Ministry of Education Logistics Centre. In addition, six UNICEF warehouses were handed over to the Ministry to form the nerve centre of the supply and distribution operations for schools across the country. Under the supervision of UNICEF Supply Division staff, the new workforce - all Afghans - was trained in warehouse management, the use of databases and basic health and safety. UNICEF installed a classroom at the warehouse, equipped with 20 computers, and provided on-site literacy classes.

One sensitive issue was the employment of women in the warehouse. UNICEF wanted to ensure that at least some of the 200 new jobs would be accessible to women. According to local custom, women could not work in the same room as men so the ware-

The basic distribution chain was designed as follows:



houses were divided with simple plastic sheets, so that women could work on the production line with the required level of privacy.

### Conclusion

Lessons have been learned, sometimes the hard way. New ideas have been tried and adopted. Iraq will be the first time the BTS model will be exported outside Afghanistan and there are already marked differences in how UNICEF is planning to proceed.

The supply operation for education in Afghanistan, especially the logistics centre in Kabul, represents a new approach to emergency logistics. The objective is to assist countries in transition to bridge the gap between emergency and development by building national capacity so that a country becomes self-sufficient in the planning, production and distribution of educational or other supplies.

When a commitment is made and key personnel deployed and with backing from the highest levels, UNICEF can move incredibly fast and effectively.

In the case of Afghanistan, UNICEF pulled out the stops in order to make things happen. The institutional elements that allow such a high impact project to occur can have ripple effects throughout an organisation. In the case of UNICEF, BTS has put logistics operations back on the map. Recently there have been high level discussions on how logistics professionals are supposed to fit into future frameworks. Entwining UNICEF's recognised ability in procurement with a new approach to logistics augurs well for an operational future that can only be described as predictably unpredictable.

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For more information, visit UNICEF's Afghanistan Back to School website at [www.unicef.org/noteworthy/afghanistan/bts](http://www.unicef.org/noteworthy/afghanistan/bts). Details of the School in a Box concept are at [www.supply.unicef.dk/emergencies/schoolkit.htm](http://www.supply.unicef.dk/emergencies/schoolkit.htm)

