Humanitarian mapping by Rupert Douglas-Bate

In order to better serve those affected by conflict and disasters, there is a real need among aid agencies to better understand their locations, numbers and needs. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are computer mapping software systems. Currently they are being used by relief and development agencies to improve decision making and assist in the presentation of information relating to public health, epidemiology and humanitarian aid. To be most effective, maps must be:

- **Timely:** Maps should be available for use the moment a mission starts, so it may be worth a visit to your local bookshop to try and find paper maps relevant to the area you will be working in. GIS file formats can be updated with information as the situation unfolds. The presentation of such maps at sectoral coordination meetings can have an electrifying effect on understanding; maps speak louder than words.

- **Simple:** Maps that contain more than eight colours are too complicated. The scale needs to be appropriate to the situation, for example 1:10,000 for refugee camps and 1:100,000 for towns and surrounding villages. A proven idea is to draw a freehand map that contains the style and form of the desired map but not yet the content. Once this objective map is obtained the team can work backwards in terms of designing questions and data collection strategies. Maps may now be rapidly generated and updated, within the above criteria. Placed upon a basic ground layer, overlays may include information such as population numbers, shelter, agriculture, hospitals, water and mass graves.

- **Relevant:** Given the advent of GIS, maps may now be rapidly generated and updated, within the above criteria. Placed upon a basic ground layer, overlays may include information such as population numbers, shelter, agriculture, hospitals, water and mass graves.

- **Culturally sensitive:** Radios, sat phones, vehicles and, indeed, maps may be treated with suspicion by local governmental authorities in conflict zones. The best way around this is to request a government person to be seconded on a fixed term contract to work with the mapping team. This will help dispel suspicion and enhance capacity building.

Rupert Douglas-Bate is Development Director of Aid For Aid, a UK charity: www.aidforaid.org.uk, Email: rdouglasbate@aidforaid.org.uk

A longer version of this article was originally published in Aid Workers Exchange: see www.aidworkers.net/exchange/20030514.html

For further information about Humanitarian Logistics Software see: www.fritzinstitute.org

1. The conclusions of this article are based on research into the technology underlying the relief supply chains of ten major humanitarian agencies: American Red Cross, CARE USA, Catholic Relief Services, International Committee of the Red Cross, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, International Rescue Committee, Médecins Sans Frontières-Belgium, WFP, UNICEF and World Vision International.