

Coordination in the Great Lakes

by George Fenton

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the most inhospitable, insecure and operationally complex countries of the world in which to deliver humanitarian relief.

Due to the civil war that has raged there from 1998, at least 3.3 million people have either been killed or have died of hunger and disease - more people killed in any war since the end of World War II¹. Huge numbers of Congolese civilians have been displaced. According to the Global IDP Database, over 2.5 million out of a national population of some 50 million are now internally displaced. In 2002 alone, over 500,000 people were displaced, mainly because of intensified violence in the north-eastern Ituri and eastern South Kivu regions. The aid organisation, World Vision, is attempting to provide emergency shelter and water for over 50,000 people who fled from atrocities perpetrated by rebel groups near the town of Bunia. However, due to insecurity, supply convoys have been delayed on the Uganda/DRC border for up to two weeks.

The scattering of so many people across such a huge area while conflict continues would make the problems faced by logisticians difficult enough in a country with good roads and air connections. In DRC, however, decades of under-investment, exploitation, corruption and neglect have left the nation's infrastructure in a pitiful state.

The war has also caused the country to be divided de facto into different territories, further eroding what commercial, economic and physical links there once were. According to Refugees International, lack of access due to insecurity and poor infrastructure makes the DRC the most expensive country in the world in which to deliver humanitarian aid².

Hopes of a gradual improvement in the situation have been raised by the signing in April 2003 of a peace agreement between the Kinshasa government and the largest rebel groups. Efforts are under way to restore commerce throughout the Congo and reopen commercial links. If peace is maintained, this could lead eventually to the integration of Congo's disparate regions, bringing benefits for logistical operations.

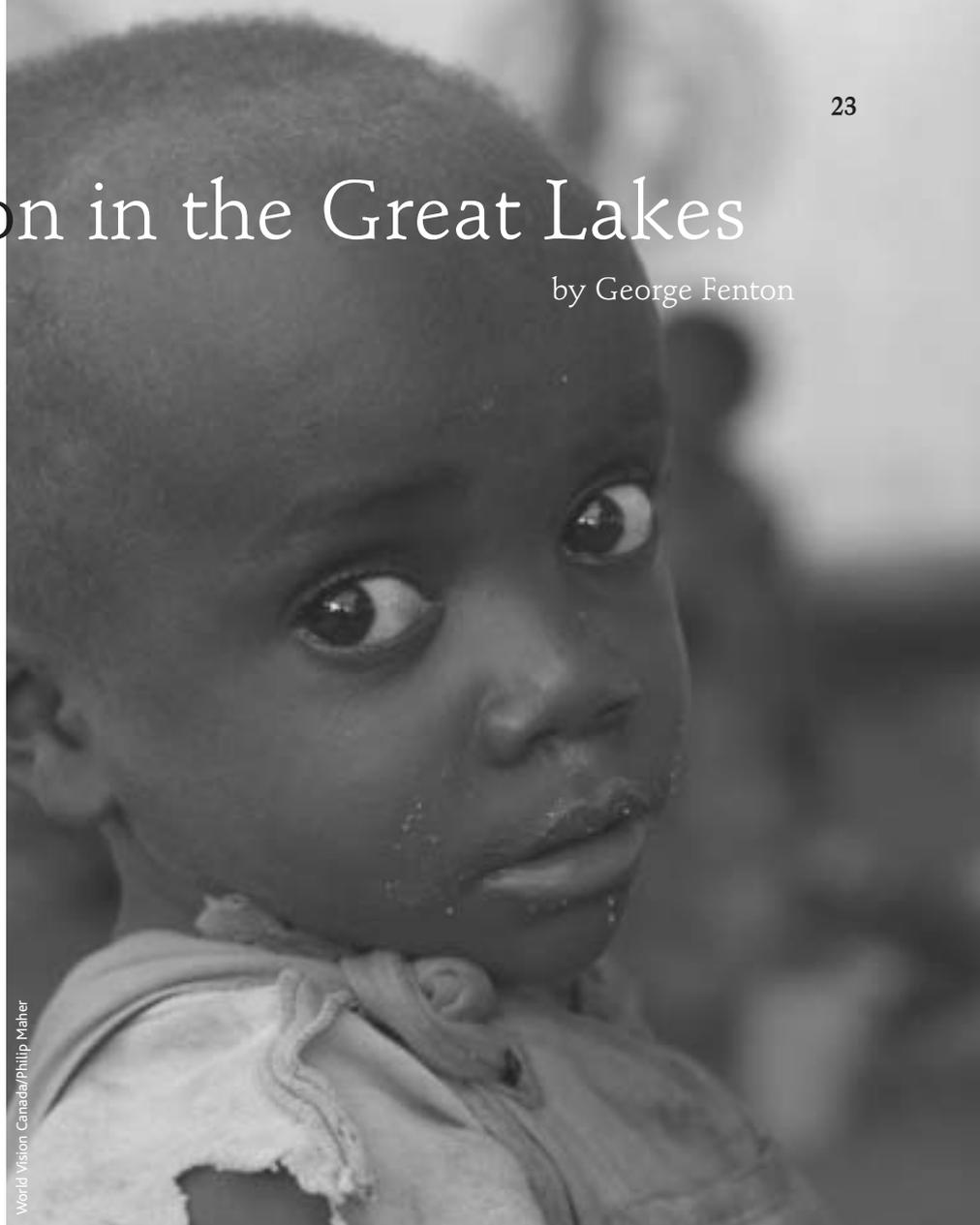
Lack of teamwork

The increased frequency and magnitude of emergencies throughout Africa, and particularly in the Great Lakes Region, have created a need for aid organisations to improve their logistics capability and capacity. While some organisations have risen to the challenge and are beginning to recognise the value of inter-agency coordination and collaboration, others still tend to regard logistics as an unfortunate - though necessary -

expense rather than an important component of strategic management.

Many humanitarian organisations appear to be at a similar stage in their approach to supply chain management as the commercial sector was in the 1970s and 80s, when personnel engaged in logistics were underpaid and poorly trained. Many businesses, realising that significant financial savings can be made through the implementation of efficient controls, now take logistics very seriously indeed. In addition, the outsourcing of key tasks such as procurement to experienced service providers often allows a company (or organisation) to focus on its core expertise. These issues are just as salient for aid organisations as they are for the supply chain operations and skilled logisticians of the commercial world.

Problems of inter-agency coordination are often most evident in the initial, frantic stages of response to a humanitarian emergency when aid



World Vision Canada/Philip Maher

agencies often fail to make the effort, or simply find it too difficult, to collaborate effectively. In addition to the logistical problems of coordination, it is a sad reality that all too often emergencies trigger a huge scramble among aid organisations for donor money to support their own relief initiatives. This is often to the detriment of valuable coordination. Sometimes little attention is paid to what other agencies are doing amid single-minded approaches to maximise marketing opportunities.

Donors can perpetuate this problem, tending to distribute money to favoured organisations, and are often guilty of failing to coordinate among themselves and with the wider aid community. There appears to be a need for donors to promote better emergency preparedness and collaboration, not only among aid organisations but also among themselves.

Partly as a result of the failure within aid organisations to address logistical issues in a professional manner – their focus being more on humanitarian need – rifts have sometimes developed between logistics and programme management functions. This has led to a need within many organisations to find ways of ‘selling’ the importance of logistics, ultimately to ensure the success of humanitarian activities. In addition, there appear to be few established common standards and systems – for relief supplies, for example – and a very wide variety of approaches to the provision of logistics services. Unless action is taken to rectify current logistical inefficiencies, improve coordination and ensure good operating standards, aid organisations will continue to waste millions of dollars.

Moves to improve coordination

Realising that better coordination is vital, some aid agencies are beginning to come together to find ways to pool resources, prevent operational overlap and boost efficiency. An Emergency Preparedness and Response Working Group has been formed for the East Africa and Great Lakes Regions: a first step in improving **practical** collaboration and information exchange in key areas between aid organisations at a regional level. The group, which currently has 17 members comprising NGOs, international organisations and UN agencies, was formed in Kenya in 2002 under the auspices of the United

Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). OCHA wanted to encourage better inter-agency collaboration due to concerns over the many logistical constraints on humanitarian operations that exist in central and eastern Africa.

Regional Logistics Managers from World Vision International and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies established the core group and jointly chair meetings every two months. Four technical sub-groups have been set up to discuss initiatives on emergency preparedness logistics, human resource development, joint response capacity and telecommunication technologies. The aim of the group is to develop joint solutions to some of the many practical difficulties all members face when providing humanitarian aid, primarily to people within the East Africa and Great Lakes regions.

For example, the group is currently working on:

- developing innovative and potentially money-saving initiatives such as the sharing of procurement services (joint supply/framework agreements) and the sharing of logistics resources such as charter flights, personnel and contingency stocks. The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Society in Kenya recently offered to loan some of its emergency stocks of shelter materials to member agencies so that they could respond quickly to the DRC crisis.
- establishing joint emergency preparedness and response training events. In July, staff from several member organisations attended a series of security management courses in Nairobi. Other joint

courses are planned, covering subjects such as disaster preparedness and logistics management.

- improving the utilisation and compatibility of key tried and tested logistics systems. Some systems used by, for example, commercial transport companies have been found to be suitable for the management of humanitarian operations.
- contributing to the development of common standards (such as the Sphere Project³) and specifications for emergency equipment. Can agencies agree to collectively purchase shelter materials that are branded with multiple logos and printed statements conforming to certain relief standards?

The core working group has found that, although they meet primarily to discuss and share technical information, perhaps the greatest value comes from personal and professional contact with a variety of colleagues. This brings greater knowledge of partner organisations and better understanding of ways in which organisations, as well as donors, can better collaborate and coordinate during a crisis. The group's greatest hope is that their efforts should complement existing structures and avoid the need to constantly ‘reinvent the wheel’, leading to better, cheaper and more efficient logistical operations.

George Fenton is Logistics Manager for World Vision International's Global Rapid Response Team.

Email: george_fenton@wvi.org

1. According to a recent report from the International Rescue Committee: ‘Mortality in the DRC – Results from a Nationwide Survey’, April 2003: http://intranet.theirc.org/docs/drc_mortality_iii_exec.pdf
2. Refugee International ref: www.refintl.org/cgi-bin/ri/country?cc=00003
3. Sphere Project: www.sphereproject.org



IDPs from Bunia build new shelters near the village of Eringeti, Ituri province, DRC.