

Lean logistics: delivering food to northern Ugandan IDPs

by Margaret Vikki and Erling Bratheim

Uganda's 17-year civil conflict entered a new phase in mid 2002 when the Ugandan army launched Operation Iron Fist and entered southern Sudan with the objective of finally wiping out the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

The operation had only limited success. Intent on vengeance, the rebels slipped back into northern Uganda. Atrocities, attacks on civilians and soldiers, abductions and burning of houses ensued. As a result, most of the population of northern Uganda is now internally displaced, concentrated in 'protected villages' with extremely limited access to food and water and entirely dependent on food distribution through the World Food Programme. In the depopulated countryside agricultural production has ceased and markets have closed. Movement of people and goods is greatly restricted. People who originally grew some food to supplement WFP rations are now not able to sustain their livelihoods without help from the international community.

Regardless of how the tragedy unfolds, IDPs are likely to remain extremely vulnerable and heavily dependent on food distribution for the foreseeable future. If the insurgency continues into 2004, IDPs will be forced to remain in camps and the need for food distribution will persist. Should security improve to the point where IDPs can begin returning to their former homes or resettle elsewhere, there will still be a tremendous need for assistance due to the severity of disruption to agriculture. At least one productive harvesting season will be needed to improve the food security situation. It is likely that, during the initial return phase, the majority of the population will still want to sleep in camps for security reasons. Most of the IDPs will still depend on food received through WFP/Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

Distribution arrangements

Food is currently distributed to 700-800,000 persons located in about 60

IDP camps in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader. Funding is provided by WFP and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. NRC carries out General Food Distribution (GFD) as a WFP implementing partner. WFP is responsible for the procurement of food items and transportation to the extended delivery point, while NRC supervises transportation to the final delivery point as well as distribution to the beneficiaries. NRC is responsible for the reception, storage, handling and distribution of WFP food aid commodities.

WFP, NRC and a contracted transport company meet on a monthly basis to draw up the food distribution operational plan. WFP provides the food and determines rations based on analysed household food security assessments. NRC's role in the triangular partnership entails:

- provision of competent personnel for GFD implementation
- collection of (gender-disaggregated) data and assessments in the IDP camps to enable joint analysis and appropriate intervention with WFP
- monthly reporting to NRC HQ and to WFP
- carrying out mobilisation and sensitisation of beneficiaries and local communities - usually prior to distribution but when security is bad by the use of a loudspeaker on the day of distribution
- hiring and training of volunteers who assist in crowd control and GFD supervision
- liaising with local administration and camp managements to determine who is entrusted with responsibility for identifying legitimate beneficiaries.

For an operation which provides so much for so many the logistical



IDP camp in northern Uganda

structures in place are remarkably simple. They consist of standard warehousing procedures, labour-intensive loading of vehicles using local labourers and locally hired transportation making optimum use of the limited number of locally available freight vehicles.

Warehouse facilities have capacity to cope with the highest turnover of food predicted in a worst-case scenario. They also meet the basic standards in terms of structure/infrastructure, damp control during the rainy season, security and loading area capacity.

In warehouses in the towns of Gulu and Kitgum, sacks can be stacked four metres high. Food is stacked by item and chronologically in order to ensure that the first delivered stocks of any one item are first to be delivered to beneficiaries. This prevents wastage of stocks that have reached their expiry dates. Each stack is of a standard base size in order to simplify the counting process. A simple stock card system is in place which is done manually and later transferred to a computer database used for tracking and archival purposes. A stock card is held for each different stack of food, with a central register also being updated to hold an overall picture of stocks in place, their arrival date and exact location within the facility. Due to the weakness of computer facilities and the potential for

software and hardware failure, the computerised aspects of the system (the central register of all items) are backed up by the retention of paper records.

In order to guard against theft, the compounds of both warehousing facilities are completely fenced off with a single constantly guarded access point. Within each compound, individual warehouse buildings are kept padlocked except for loading, unloading or stock checking. Daily checks of all stored items are conducted to identify any cases of interference or theft of stocks. Constant attention is also given to the protection of foodstuffs against contamination. Warehouses are kept immaculately clean and fumigated on a periodic basis. Regular inspections are made to ensure that entry points for insects and small animals are blocked wherever possible.

Vehicles are supplied by a local freight company which is responsible for recruitment and management of drivers. Vehicles are loaded slightly under their capacity in order to allow for breakdown and redistribution of stocks *en route* to the final distribution point. Although this incurs a slight extra cost per delivery, there have been substantial gains in opera-

tional effectiveness. Roads are in a very poor state and if vehicles break down the risks of looting are very high. It is essential to maintain capacity to redistribute loads when vehicles are stranded in the countryside.

Security constraints

The security environment in northern Uganda is particularly challenging. LRA fighters regularly ambush vehicles, using maximum brutality. Captured drivers are killed. Once looted, vehicles are burned. Refugee and IDP camps are targeted in order to steal food and personal possessions and to abduct and forcibly recruit children. Both the LRA and the army have planted landmines. Staff offices and accommodation are at risk of robbery.

Given the dangers of any travel, WFP demands military escorts for all food deliveries. Each convoy of trucks is accompanied by two army vehicles and around 70 armed soldiers. Drivers are taught convoy skills, to note the presence of vehicles to the front and rear and briefed to stay at least 100 metres from the nearest army vehicle in case it runs over a mine or is ambushed. In the event of a mechanical breakdown drivers of the vehicle in front are instructed to

stop. In the event of an ambush the vehicle in front of the incident will drive on while those behind will either turn around or reverse out of trouble as the situation dictates. In desperate situations vehicles drive into the bush before their occupants disembark.

NRC is incorporated into the UN security system which operates a five tier system in which one is the lowest perceived threat level. Northern Uganda is currently rated at security level four, meaning that only essential staff should be deployed and only operations of an urgent nature conducted. Level five requires evacuation.

Delivering food

On an average day food is distributed to about 20,000 beneficiaries. When security permits, each camp is visited once a month. It is an important principle for NRC that once food is brought to camp distribution points the beneficiaries should take on as much responsibility as possible for the actual distribution. They are thus involved in unloading sacks from the trucks, scooping the food and ensuring orderly and controlled distribution. If the village social structure survives intact within the camps then food is distributed to the traditional village leader who further distributes it to

WFP requires heavy military escort for its food aid convoys in northern Uganda.





Food distribution

individual families. Otherwise it is the head of family, often a woman, who receives the ration.

On several occasions distribution has had to be stopped for weeks on end, leaving the IDPs with no assistance. WFP/NRC are engaged in regular dialogue with the authorities to supply a sufficient escort force for the convoys and, equally importantly after food has been distributed, a military presence in the camps to deter rebel raiders from stealing it.

The amount of food distributed to each family is done in accordance with the number of members registered on the cards of each head of family. As the population fluctuates, both due to movements between camps and through arrival of new IDPs to the camps, it is a constant challenge for the staff to ensure that those entitled to the rations are those who actually receive them. They must always try to be one step ahead of the beneficiaries when it comes to identifying ingenious ways of getting extra rations by presentation of false identities, bogus new family members and non-registration of deaths.

Staff training is crucial to meeting these challenges. Staff need to be made aware of both the importance of

getting the right rations to the right people but also of how to counter pressure and manipulation from groups or individuals, many of them well-connected persons with authority.

Staff members are also under intense pressure to travel on convoys in very difficult conditions. The security situation is so dire that military escorts cannot be dispensed with. At the same time the presence of an escort of soldiers increases the risk of rebel attack, thus putting NRC staff at greater risk. Only the dedication of highly qualified national staff makes it possible to carry out the work under these extreme conditions. Management has to constantly consider when it is defensible to put staff at risk and go to the camps and when it is necessary to stay put.

Under the present circumstances in northern Uganda, the number of displaced persons is increasing and more than half of the population is dependent on food assistance primarily provided by NRC. This puts a continuous pressure on the capacity and the management of the logistics necessary to assist the population with the most basic needs.

Though the unpredictable security conditions in northern Uganda have

posed a great challenge to the project, NRC has succeeded in delivering food to the needy population most of the time. Over the last year, however, the deterioration of the security situation has forced NRC to suspend distribution to some of the beneficiaries for long periods at a time. Furthermore, the movement of people back and forth between the camps and their villages, as well as between camps, whenever the security situation allowed it, has made registration and identification of beneficiaries more difficult.

In this type of long-lasting conflict, the greatest challenge, however, lies in trying to counter the dependency of the population on food aid. NRC and other parties involved have very limited possibilities to address issues such as the loss of skills and people's ability to secure their own livelihood and become more self-reliant.

However smooth the logistics, and however satisfied we are that basic needs are being met, there are questions that should constantly trouble and challenge us in our role as humanitarian actors:

- What is the effect of long-term distribution on the ongoing conflict?
- Is there scope for NRC to combine food distribution with peace and reconciliation initiatives to nudge protagonists in a positive direction?
- Should we set a time limit to how long even a successful operation should be allowed to continue if the political situation remains unchanged and prospects for peace remain elusive?

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For further information on displacement in Uganda see the recently updated country profile from the Global IDP Project at www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/IdpProjectDb/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountries/Uganda