

Sudan: world's greatest humanitarian transport challenge

by Rob McConnell

The Fleet Forum, a group of more than 40 aid agencies, is working to slash by 25% the annual \$800 million cost of running some 60,000 vehicles. Darfur has shown the need to work together to achieve more cost-efficient and safe humanitarian transport.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that there are currently 1,100 vehicles used by the 81 agencies meeting the needs of over two million displaced people in Darfur. Are the vehicles the right type to do the job as safely and reliably as possible? How should they be maintained in a place where there are no garages or mechanics trained to service imported high-tech trucks? Do drivers understand how to use their vehicles in the very insecure environment along roads – if they exist at all – that are among the worst in the world? If more attention were paid to the procurement, management and maintenance of vehicle fleets, could agencies use fewer vehicles and ensure they are not worn out after two years – the estimated life-span of trucks used in the rigorous Darfur conditions?

After staff salaries, transport is the largest budget item for humanitarian agencies. Much of the money is wasted through inconsistent procurement policies, shoddy maintenance, negligence, road accidents and bureaucratic headaches. Few aid organisations utilise a computerised fleet management system. Few, if any, consistently implement driver training programmes. Road safety issues are generally not considered as

an integral component of relief and development operations. Procurement of vehicles is conducted in an ad hoc manner with only limited regard to the standardisation of specifications and opportunities to leverage reduced pricing and services from suppliers.

The Fleet Forum is an initiative launched by the International Federation of the Red Cross, the World Food Programme, World Vision International and TNT, an international transport/logistics company. It is working with partners to develop humanitarian transport standards that will improve capabilities through the professionalisation of vehicle fleet management. The Fleet Forum Meeting is now an annual event and a permanent Secretariat in Geneva provides support and information to an increasing number of participant organisations, commercial partners and other interested parties.

At the start of the Darfur response, Sudanese bureaucracy put many obstacles in the way of NGO importation of vehicles. The few vehicles available on the rental market were expensive, unreliable and lacking in basic communications equipment. To help overcome this problem, OCHA used European Union funding to procure and import 75 light

vehicles which were donated to 37 NGOs operating in remote locations. The Fleet Forum has initiated a project to capture the lessons learnt in Sudan and

to advocate replication of this collaborative method of vehicle provision in the future. The Fleet Forum is the first attempt to globally address the issue of humanitarian transport in order to foster a more professional approach to humanitarian fleet management. We are working:

- to develop common benchmarks for procurement and operating costs in order to quantify potential savings
- with TNT to identify key elements of vehicle operating costs and best practices in fleet management
- with Volvo road safety experts to analyse data provided by a number of organisations on the circumstances and consequences of vehicle crashes in order to identify ways to minimise risk
- to give individual aid agencies more muscle when dealing with governments: Oxfam GB faced massive customs duties when it shipped 25 Indian-made four-wheel drive vehicles to Sri Lanka after the Asian tsunami, due to failing to win exemption from the Sri Lanka's 324% vehicle import duty
- to raise awareness of safety and security of transport staff
- to increase the use of environmentally-friendly vehicles.

While Darfur continues to be one of the worst humanitarian disasters ever, development work in south Sudan is just getting started. In a region where the few roads are blocked by seasonal rains, transport access to assist the millions planning to go home is a monumental challenge. Roads must be built and repaired and facilities for vehicle servicing and repair built almost from scratch. The Fleet Forum hopes to work with humanitarian agencies to make significant savings and avoid the number of deaths and injuries which have happened in Darfur.

Rob McConnell is the coordinator of the Fleet Forum (www.fleetforum.org). Email: rob.mcconnell@fleetforum.org

