

Complex humanitarian relief issues merit close attention

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Airports can play a central role in ensuring aid reaches disaster-hit areas, but efficient operations require detailed planning and careful co-ordination between a wide range of agencies. Sarah Gibbons reports

International efforts are under way to improve how airports can serve as effective hubs for humanitarian logistics, reducing the risk that they become bottlenecks in disaster relief efforts.

These moves follow research and a growing consensus in the aviation and aid sectors that while airports are undoubtedly a lifeline during crises, they can also hamper the efficient delivery of aid to victims. Academics, UN relief organisations, and private sector representatives involved in disaster management have all called for changes to how airports play a role in responding to disasters.

One vital forum for discussions is meetings during the annual Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW), co-chaired by UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.



Militaries are frequently involved in humanitarian relief operations, as shown here on 29 March as a Brazilian Air Force C-130M is loaded with supplies bound for Mozambique after an earthquake. (Getty Images)

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Two years ago, the HNPW created a Second Focus Task Force (FTF) on Airport Efficiency for Effective Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response. Co-chaired by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and OCHA, it includes representatives from Airports Council International (ACI), the Civil Air Navigation Services Organisation (CANSO), Deutsche Post DHL (DPDHL), the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Food Programme (WFP), and Delft University of Technology (TU Delft) in the Netherlands.

The stated goal of the task force is to develop “a collective approach and tools to improve co-ordination between humanitarian actors, airport authorities, and civil aviation authorities”. The FTF has created an action plan that aims to improve the guidance and available training for airports to rapidly convert from handling scheduled traffic to becoming logistics hubs in emergency situations.

DHL Global Forwarding, the air freight division of DPDHL, in February 2019 opened a Global Competence Center for Humanitarian Logistics in Dubai, close to the two international airports there. The centre provides a range of post-disaster services including air and ocean freight, customs clearance, warehousing and local distribution of humanitarian shipments for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), aid agencies, their suppliers, and manufacturers. These activities will be supported by air traffic control and data analytics services “designed to offer heightened levels of freight visibility for humanitarian situations of any level of urgency and complexity”, DHL Global Forwarding announced in a statement marking the launch of the facility.

Amadou Diallo, CEO of DHL Global Forwarding for Middle East and Africa, said the company has “the capability, expertise, and global network to render resilient logistics support to organisations who are highly committed to ensure that critical resources are delivered to meet the needs of those who require them”.

Organisations can also use the Global Competence Centre to contact the DHL Global Forwarding international network of colleagues and partners, to access resources and services such as temperature-controlled transport facilities for medicines.

Dubai – with its excellent air connections to Asia, Africa, and Europe – already hosts other logistics hubs including the International Humanitarian City, which is the largest humanitarian hub in the world from which nine UN agencies and 48 NGOs currently run logistics operations.

Fatima Ait Bendawad, head of the Global Competence Centre, said that preparedness is what counts above all else, from expedited customs clearances, to facilities and expertise in handling dangerous goods such as chemicals or medicines, or communications networks that enable multiple agencies to work together in planning and delivering responses to emergencies.

“Humanitarian logistics requires dedication and co-ordination with different stakeholders to get critical goods to those in need, gaining trust, and working with numerous partners to co-ordinate shipments in situations which often require short turnaround times,” said Massar Diop, DHL Global Forwarding director of humanitarian logistics.

As well as this initiative, as part of its corporate social responsibility programme DPDHL provides disaster relief teams to grapple with problems in natural disaster zones. It also runs the Get Airports Ready for Disasters (GARD) programme, which runs joint workshops with the UNDP to prepare airport managers for handling logistical issues associated with natural disaster situations.

Meanwhile, TU Delft heads the Airports in Disaster research programme, which looks at ways to improve the delivery of humanitarian aid by air, working with relief agencies and aviation industry representatives.

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