Disaster response with a difference – Afghanistan June 1998

By Joe Barr, Pacific Emergency Management Associates Pty Ltd

Occasionally some of us experience those 'What in the hell am I doing here?' moments. In June 1998 I found myself in one of those moments. I was sitting cross-legged on the carpet of a mud brick house in the village of Shahr-e Buzurg in north-eastern Afghanistan, chewing on one leg of what had obviously been the oldest chicken in the world, awaiting the arrival of the local district 'Commander'. He was galloping on horseback, John Wayne fashion, through the mountains to tell us why he was unhappy with the way the UN and the International Red Cross were delivering earthquake relief in his area of control. Around us were large numbers of his men, armed with AK47s and other weapons and carrying large amounts of ammunition. Across the narrow valley were the damaged buildings of his centre of power while on a small pad in that valley our transport, a Russian Mi8 helicopter was parked. Its Tajik crew (of undoubted skill but varying commitment) was keen to return to Dushanbe in Tajikistan before the afternoon clouds descended and turned this part of the extended Hindu Kush into a centre of cumulo granitus clouds. 'Us' consisted of the Icelandic head of the Red Cross Team, a British representative of a Norwegian NGO, two Afghani interpreters from Kabul and Peshawar, many kilometres away, and myself, from Australia as the local UN team leader. The only way out was our helicopter or a three-day donkey ride.

Earthquake damage

The UNDAC team

Perhaps it all started in early 1995 when I was nominated as the Australian representative to attend the second United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) Team course held in Lausanne in Switzerland during April of that year. Some 30 people from 14 countries attended the two-week course. Most had experience of emergencies in many parts of the world

while the remainder were United Nations staff members with more limited experience who might be appointed to lead teams in the future (the UN likes to have its own staff leading its teams!). If you nominated a major disaster during the last twenty years, someone in that room had spent time on relief there. There were people with experience in El Salvador, Angola, Ruanda, Armenia, Japan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Samoa and many other places. It was an amazing gathering.

During the course we learned how the UN disaster operations were administered and funded, discussed the characteristics of various natural and complex disasters, shared experience of various disaster operations and learned of health precautions. Training was provided on assessment techniques and on coordinating the activities of international government and non-government agencies after disasters. There were sessions on how to behave when held up by bandits or roving paramilitary bands, on negotiation with local military commanders and on dealing with the media. Equipment was tested and used so that we could operate the team's satellite and radio sets. Throughout the course there was emphasis on team-building and international cooperation, cultural and administrative sensitivity. The climax was a 20-hour mission simulation exercise that began at nine-o-clock one evening in our hotel and finished late the following afternoon at a Swiss Civil Defence Training College training ground.

Once trained we returned to our normal jobs and were added to the UNDAC Team list. After two further courses, there are now about 120 Team members from 24 countries around the world. Since July 1993 the UNDAC Team has conducted 46 missions to 37 countries.

The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) office in Geneva administers the team. Its Disaster Response Section monitors disasters around the world and the response to those disasters. When it believes that major international assistance may be needed, OCHA alerts UNDAC Team members by fax through national focal points. Team members respond by reporting their availability for a mission. If the UN, after discussion with its local representatives and the host government, decides to activate an UNDAC Team, a team of two or more with the required skills and experience is selected from the members available and placed on standby or activated to move to the disaster site. Movement may be fast as OCHA aims to be able to get a team to a disaster site anywhere in the world in less than 36 hours. The countries that have provided UNDAC team members meet costs, usually as a result of formal agreements with the UN. Australia is one of a small number of exceptions whose formal agreements are still being negotiated, so funding of missions are handled in other ways.

The Afghanistan earthquake

On 30 May 1998 an earthquake of magnitude 6.9 on the Richter Scale occurred in north-eastern Afghanistan some 70 km west-north-west of the town of Faizabad. This was the second large earthquake in the area in 1998 as a similar sized tremor had occurred nearby on 4 February and sparked a major international relief effort. The May earthquake killed some 4,500 people in Takhar and Badakhshan Provinces. 7,000 families were affected and about 16,000 houses were destroyed or seriously damaged. Aftershocks were still causing damage up to a month after the initial tremor.

The United Nations and a number of non-

Village teams awaiting delivery of relief supplies

government organisations were working in the area and immediately reported on their first impressions of the impact. A joint relief operation was mounted by United Nations, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and a range of national and international non-government organisations (NGOs). An UNDAC Team was activated and arrived in Islamabad on 2 June. As the scale of the disaster was appreciated further UNDAC Team members were activated. I was asked to join the team at 9.30pm on Friday 5 June and by 1230pm on Saturday was in the air. Only after arrival in Islamabad in Pakistan was I told that I was expected to lead the whole UN Relief Team in Afghanistan.

The local committee waiting to receive supplies

The affected area

The affected area is in the part of Afghanistan that has not yet been captured by the Taliban government and is ruled by the so-called Northern Alliance of local leaders. It is situated in the region between the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs—rugged country that is an extension of the Himalayas. Land communications are appalling with road access only possible from Tajikistan, and that over roads only suitable for the big six-wheel-drive trucks left over from the Russian occupation. In some areas the road runs along riverbeds and is only passable in dry periods. Broken bridges are a regular problem. Away from the few roads, all land transport is by donkey (a donkey in this region can carry a load of up to 50kg). A few airfields are available but apart from a few Antonov transports operated by the Northern Alliance, the only aircraft that normally fly into the area are the small Beechcraft aircraft operated by the UN and ICRC.

There are a few towns but most of the region's inhabitants live in small mountain villages perched on steep ridges or on narrow river valleys. Almost all homes are built of mud-brick with little reinforcement. Roofs are made of wooden poles laid across between the walls and covered with layers of mud. Whenever the roof leaks, as it invariably does during the winter thaw, extra mud is added and the roofs inevitably become very heavy. Rural people could be considered subsistence agriculturalists. The great stands of pistachio trees that provided an income in the past were almost all cut down for fuel during the fighting that forced the Soviet Union to withdraw from the country in 1989 and during the subsequent civil war. Potatoes and a short variety of wheat are grown during the short summer. Sheep and goats are herded to the high pastures in summer and back to the lowlands in the other seasons. Oxen are used for ploughing – during a month in the country, which included the wheat harvest season, I saw one tractor. Most agriculture is conducted by hand using methods that would not have been unusual in western countries a century ago. The only cash income appears to be obtained from the sale of opium.

The relief operation

Development Assistance in Afghanistan is currently administered from Pakistan as many agencies have learned from bitter experience not to base too many assets in Kabul or other Afghan centres. After discussions in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, the UN and IFRC had decided to base their relief operation in Faizabad (sometimes spelt Feyzabad), a town of some 10,000 people located in a river valley at about 1220m just east of the earthquake-affected area. Its great advantage was that it had an airfield with a Russian steel planking runway. This had once been used as a Russian logistics base and also had four helicopter pads. The runway was not ideal (during most of my time in Faizabad we employed a local welder to keep cutting or welding breaks in the planking) but it would take aircraft up to the size of an Antonov 26 or 32 able to carry about 4-5 tonnes of freight. The only other nearby airfield, located west of the affected area, had a longer gravel runway but this was in a marginal state of repair and local support facilities were even more limited.

Helicopter base at Faizabad

A sub-base for operations was established at Rustaq, a smaller town just west of the earthquake affected area, which had no airfield but had open spaces for helicopter operations and a road link to Tajikistan.

Having decided on a base, some base facilities had to be established. Only three buildings on the airfield still had roofs so, by agreement with the local military commander, one was obtained as a UN operations base. As there were no water or other facilities at the airfield, it was decided to accommodate relief workers in Faizabad town. This lay about 4 km away down a road so bad that it took between 25 mins and an hour to traverse by four-wheel drive vehicle on those days when it was not cut by flash-flooding from storms in the hills. The only hangar, now disused, was obtained and repaired to provide waterproof storage for food supplies. It was later supplemented by a framed plastic covered store for other relief supplies. Communications with the outside world were by HF radio or by satellite terminal. All equipment and supplies were flown in by Beechcraft or by UN Antonov.

Before any part of the airfield could be used for relief operations it had to be checked for mines by the UN Mine Clearance Team. The check found no mines in the area used but the team did remove live mortar rounds, grenades and ammunition. Fortunately the highest risk area for mines, around a previous Soviet strongpoint at the corner of the airfield, was not required. This are was reputed to have some thousands of land mines in it.

No aircraft are based at Faizabad and the warring military authorities operate the only remaining aircraft in the country. The UN had two chartered Antonov aircraft available, one in Pakistan and one in Tajikistan. A single Mil MI8 helicopter capable of carrying up to 2 tonnes of

Relief supplies being unloaded

supplies could be available between peace monitoring missions in Tajikistan (which had also been in a state of civil war). These were obviously not going to be enough and a world-wide appeal for helicopters was made. ICRC quickly chartered two further Mi8s and other helicopters continued to trickle in until at the peak, the last week of July, we were operating nine Mi8s (variously capable of carrying between 2 and 4 tonnes), two Mi26s (capable of lifting up to 15 tonnes each at this altitude) and a Bell Longranger for liaison and assessment.

Assessment of the disaster

No reliable census of the region has been conducted since 1979 and recent fighting had forced many population movements. Reports from those who had walked to main towns to seek help after the earthquake indicated that there had been many deaths and widespread damage but it was impossible to estimate the total impact from these reports. The first priority was to get medical and assessment teams into the affected area. As soon as helicopters were available, small teams made up of overseas and local relief personnel were delivered to badly affected areas to provide first aid, identify serious casualties for evacuation to Faizabad hospital and assess the numbers of casualties and the degree of damage.

Two major problems immediately became obvious. Firstly the local culture did not permit male doctors or nurses to examine, or even speak to, women and girl children. Despite the hard work of the available women doctors, nurses and other relief workers, there were never enough of them to visit all women and new casualties were still being discovered a month later in remote villages.

The second problem was that there were no available detailed or accurate maps of the area. It is likely that the Russians have such maps but a request for them was never answered. Fortunately the pilots of the first Tajik Air helicopters had served with the Soviet forces in the area during the 1980s and knew many of the villages (this was fortunate, as some of them could not read a map!). As future pilots would be unlikely to have this knowledge, an early support request was for hand-held GPS receivers so that teams could record the position of villages. These positions were passed back to Islamabad to be entered in a geographical information system from which a map was developed throughout the operation. Updates were sent to the operational area regularly for planning and flight crews.

This initial assessment found just under 4,000 people dead, 200 missing and 370 injured. Medical teams continued to work in the affected area and treated more than 4,000 people for all causes before the end of the operation. As the shortage of medical staff was probably the greatest continuing problem, it was only as a result of continuous strenuous effort and dedication from the staff from the Red Cross, Medecin sans Frontiers, Merlin and other non-government organisations that this result was possible.

A number of villages had completely disappeared, having slipped down the steep slopes or been buried by landslides. In others, virtually every house had collapsed, many casualties having been caused by roof poles slipping off walls during the long tremor. The roofs then fell into the houses burying the occupants under timber and earth. Debris also fell on the limited food stores left after a long winter, so food was short. The earthquake had also diverted many streams leaving nearby villages with water shortages or depleted or polluted supplies. Landslides throughout the area had resulted in the loss of some wheat crops due for harvesting while other slopes showed signs of slippage that rendered them unsafe.

Relief operations

In the first week after the earthquake only two or three helicopters were available and these were fully committed to casualty evacuation and assessment and medical team deployment. Initially there were few supplies to deliver, mainly limited wheat stocks from the local World Food Programme store and a few tarpaulins and rolls of plastic sheeting. The weather in the first two weeks was sometimes marginal for helicopter operations with low cloud around the hills (which rose to 4,000 metres) and afternoon storms. Deliveries of other supplies from Pakistan and Tajikistan began to increase later in the week and gradually stocks of needed items built up. As the main casualty evacuation workload was cleared, it was possible to begin shelter and food deliveries. Most of the shelter, medical and miscellaneous supplies were delivered by air to the two airfields in the area in up to six Antonov sorties per day. The helicopters, which returned to Dushanbe in Tajikistan overnight, also brought in some supplies but their main load was fuel to enable them to operate for as long as possible. A World Food Programme convoy of wheat that had been despatched before the earthquake for development purposes was also on its way but was delayed by poor roads. Its whereabouts was unknown for about a week and it eventually arrived in the third week.

In the eastern part of the affected area, relief could only be delivered by helicopter or donkey, as there were no roads. In the end it was only necessary to move about 100 tonnes by donkey but when the weather was bad, plans were being prepared for deliveries using up to 2,000 donkeys in convoy. The western part of the area was slightly better off as it had a road link to Tajikistan and there were roads into the earthquake area, which were gradually being cleared by a French non-government organisation. Using these it was possible to deliver supplies to freight heads for collection by donkey teams from individual villages.

An aerial view of landslides in the hill areas

As helicopter numbers increased, so did the effectiveness of the relief operation. Assessments they continued throughout the operation and the scale of needs became daunting. The following is the table for Faizabad alone on 26 June:

At the peak of the relief operation, helicopters delivered up to 75 tonnes per day despite limited flying hours. All available relief supplies had been delivered by 9 July when the international relief team withdrew.

Practicalities

The following comments on practicalities of the operation show how different it was from a relief operation in this part of the world.

Shelter

As aftershocks continued the local population eventually refused to sleep inside their

houses. This was fortunate as during my second week in-country, one complete village was buried and twenty houses from another slipped down the mountain. Fortunately, because of the caution of the inhabitants there were no casualties. Nevertheless this caution meant that shelter had to be provided for everyone in the area. Initially this took the form of plastic sheeting which could be delivered quickly but tents and tarpaulins were provided as soon as they were available. Culturally the sharing of shelter with other families was unacceptable and additional tarpaulins had to be supplied to meet purdah needs in this strict Muslim society.

	Item	Supplied to 26-6-98	Total needed to complete deliveries	Current stock
Food (mt)	Wheat grain	283.75	323.40	105.45
	Vegetable oil	14.10	16.25	22.00
	Pulses	19.75	40.75	5.20
Non-food	Tents	204	2821	1576
	Plastic sheeting (rolls)	479	293	31
	Tarpaulins	180	5869	601
	Blankets	14180	16650	3250
	Water containers	3318	2748	1336
	Cooking sets/pots	3430	3219	277
	Soap	5374	12472	28440

Distribution

Fortunately the relief teams were able to build on the experience of the previous earthquake to identify channels for distribution. Each village had a mosque and a local council based on that mosque so those councils were given responsibility for distribution of supplies. Supplies were distributed to villages on the basis of assesed population, casualties and damage and this basis was explained to the councils but the details of distribution were left to the council. Random monitoring checks showed that distribution was generally fair although the basis of distribution sometimes differed from that intended.

Initially delivery of supplies was dependent on what was available at the base. As a result different villages received different supplies and friction began to develop. Threats were made that villagers might fire on helicopters or kidnap aircrew if they did not receive more equitable treatment. As a result, relief deliveries were suspended for two days and discussions were held with three local strong leaders to solve these and other problems. It was these discussions that found me in the situation described at the beginning of the article. These leaders, known as 'Commanders' were really local war lords with varying but not inconsiderable arsenals of weapons and fighting men under their control. They depended for their power on being able to meet the needs of those men and consequently would drive a hard bargain. The discussions were not always polite or pleasant but in the end it was possible to agree a system that met the needs of the people, the international community and the Commanders. Under the agreement, supplies were delivered to main centres and collected from those centres by donkey convoys from the individual villages. One of the Commander's men and one of the relief team would jointly supervise distribution to the village teams. This system worked well and speeded up deliveries as well as reducing tension.

Air operations

Air operations were not as straightforward as might have been expected. Apart from the runway and weather problems mentioned above (which were augmented by dust reduced visibility on some later days) the main problems related to the basing of the helicopters and the supply of fuel. All helicopters except the Bell were based at Dushanbe in Tajikistan where a local 'godfather' ran the airport and the local charter company supplying some of the helicopters. He seemed determined to make operations profitable to himself and awkward for the international team. Eventually a team of three UN and two Red Cross staff were stationed there permanently just to coordinate that end of the operation. Air movements in and out of the airport were controlled by the 'godfather' and the Russian Border Police, who could and did close the border at various times—occasionally without notice. Part way through the operation the airport controller decided that helicopters that he did not own could not be based at the airport. After extensive negotiations arrangements were made to load them at Dushanbe airport but they would have to 'overnight' at a nearby military base.

Fuel was another constant problem. There was no fuel in the earthquake area and initially drums were collected in Pakistan, flown to Dushanbe to be filled then delivered to Faizabad to refuel helicopters. Unfortunately an early drum had not been properly cleaned and one of the Tajik helicopters had a fuel filter blockage. Thereafter the helicopters would not fuel from the drums and were limited each day to about three hours effective flying using their internal and external fuel and a mobile tank they brought in on arrival in the morning. As later helicopters did not have the same capacity some were limited to only one delivery flight per day. Eventually, when the giant Mi26s arrived, flying in a small fuel bowser and refuelling it each day from the Mi26 solved the problem. Even with this arrangement it was rare for more than four hours to be flown each day.

The capacity of the nine Mi8s used for deliveries varied quite considerably because

Debris of war at Faizabad Airfield

Earthquake aftermath

of different engines and equipment fits. Flying in high country, often in gusty wind conditions, required the maintenance of considerable safety margins. Eventually it was necessary to allocate each individual helicopter its own landing spot and to build loads at that spot to the agreed capacity of the aircraft.

The eventual provision of the six-seat Bell Longranger made a difference to operations out of all proportion to its size. No longer was it necessary to pull a transport helicopter off-line for vital liaison tasks or rapid medical evacuations. For future operations of this type provision of such a resource should have high priority.

Communications

As in most relief operations, communications were vital. All agencies had portable satellite terminals and these were the main link with the outside world. High frequency (HF) radios were used to Dushanbe but the distance to Rustaq, the sub-base, made their use for that vital link marginal. Interestingly, virtually all the HF equipment used was Australian in origin.

Liaison with the National Government

The Northern Alliance is one party to a civil war and only controls a small part of the country. It has limited resources and can hardly be called a national government. The Alliance had no capacity to provide relief and was grateful for the assistance provided to people in its area of control. Although the relief team kept Provincial Governors advised of our activities and flew them to see the damage, there was no joint activity. There was closer cooperation with local 'commanders' who were the real power in their area. They usually had a good idea of the situation throughout their area and, when cooperative, made delivery of relief very much easier.

Security

Despite the widespread carriage of small arms, there were no real security problems. Each part of the airfield was checked for mines and ammunition before it was used and all staff were warned to keep off the derelict military hardware in case of booby traps. Small arms fire and even mortar and rocket fire was often heard in the evenings but this was described by the locals as 'happy shooting' not aimed at anyone. On nights before detachments left town to join the forces fighting the Taliban, the volume of fire was considerably higher as they tested their weapons. The civil war did not intrude on relief activities and the closest threat was a report that Taliban artillery had penetrated to 30 km away but this was never confirmed. Nevertheless, it was necessary to monitor the number of foreign relief workers in the area and to have contingency plans for emergency evacuation.

Relief team conditions

All agencies lived in very basic conditions with staff sleeping on the floor, eating very basic food and using marginally safe water supplies. There was no running water or sewerage and outbreaks of viral diarrhoea were common. Fleas were rife in some of the accommodation and could be very annoying. In general it was found that two weeks in area was enough. After that a break was needed. Few people showed obvious signs of stress but the lightening of pressure when they left was usually very apparent.

Inter-agency cooperation

This was evidently the first major international relief operation on which the UN and Red Cross agencies had worked as the major players in such close cooperation and with the participation of so many NGOs. In general this cooperation worked well in the field with clear lines of responsibility agreed and excellent sharing of information. There were some problems in cooperation outside the country where the agencies were not working so closely together and had some 'turf' baggage. As a result the relief supply priorities set by the teams in Faizabad and Rustaq were not always met and unwanted or excess items appeared occasionally.

To ensure that all agencies were aware of developments there were regular evening briefings attended by all agencies and representatives of the Governor's office at which situation reports were given and plans discussed. These forums were found to be vital for identifying developing needs, setting priorities, smoothing out difficulties and bringing complaints out into the open. They also enabled all participants to share experience more freely. It was surprising how often a small NGO had experience that was of value to all present and might not have been shared without this regular forum.

Even within the UN agencies, which do not always work well together, field cooperation was generally good once the need for sharing information had been understood. All agencies with offices in the region provided staff to work in the field and at any one time I had staff of many nationalities from at least six UN agencies working on a variety of tasks. They often worked outside their direct experience, yet with a willingness and flexibility not often seen in that ponderous organisation.

Support from outside

The whole relief operation was complex. Overall coordination took place at Islamabad in Pakistan where there were also regular coordination meetings. Relief supplies from the rest of the world were delivered to Peshawar in Pakistan or to Dushanbe. They were then flown or trucked into the affected area and distributed from Faizabad and Rustaq.

The difficulty experienced in conducting detailed assessments of the situation and identifying needs led to delays in delivery which caused some friction with earthquake victims who could not see why their priority needs could not be met immediately. Yet most needs were met and met adequately by the end of the operation.

The hardest need to meet was for helicopters. These took time to arrive (some had flown across from the Moscow area) yet we knew in the field that tremendous efforts were being made to facilitate their early arrival. The number eventually supplied was a credit to all concerned.

Relief aircraft also brought in vital equipment for running the relief operation. Most needs were met quickly and without argument with such vital items as bottled water, supplementary foods, stationery and spare parts usually arriving within 48 hours of the request. This level of support took a great pressure off those working in the field

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation was not the function of this mission but it was very much in the minds of all relief workers. We were aware that the summer was short and that earthquake victims would need more substantial shelter by the end of September. It was also vital that they harvest the surviving crops and get them into safe storage for the winter. Any shortfalls would need to be made up with supplementary deliveries. Some of the relief agencies had no rehabilitation role but the remainder began meeting, under UN auspices, two weeks after the earthquake and projects to develop more earthquake resistant housing and improved water supplies were quickly initiated.

Finally!

What in the hell was I doing there?

I was being challenged, tested and stretched. I was being given a privilege few Australians get (I wasn't the only one—there was an Australian nurse from Wagga Wagga in the Red Cross team and there were at least two New Zealanders in the operation too) to help in the rest of the world.

I was being given the opportunity to apply all that I had learned in seventeen years in emergency management. And, I'll admit, I was enjoying myself.