

3rd International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos 2010

PRESS RELEASE

Davos, Switzerland – The earthquake that shattered much of Port au Prince and Haitian society less than a year ago underscores the crucial role of humanitarian logistics in the disaster’s aftermath.

It’s one of the major lessons learned by some 800 experts attending this week’s 3rd biannual gathering of the International Disaster Risk Conference IDRC Davos 2010 closing today in this scenic Alpine town.

One of the IDRC’s key supporters, Martin Willhaus, serves as managing director of the Switzerland-based Kühne Foundation, a unit devoted to improving the essential role of logistics during such emergencies.

Willhaus points out how his foundation sought in 1989 to reduce the disaster risk faced in developing countries by offering relief services they could not provide themselves.

“But at present,” the Swiss logistics expert told the experts assembled here, “the goal of sharply reducing the human impact of natural and man-made disasters has been disappointing. The United Nations finds that the toll of such catastrophes has actually increased 50% during the intervening period.”

But Willhaus says he and his foundation remain unbowed despite the dismaying UN news. The need for humanitarian relief transport services remains not just constant but ever more demanding.

“It [the UN data] simply reminds us all the more,” he says, “of how essential our role has become.”

Fortunately others in the field share Willhaus’ view and have mobilized their forces in collective action – especially after the trauma of the Haitian disaster. An IDRC gave a platform to these backstage actors, whose work behind the scenes often gets ignored.

U.S. Admiral James G. Stavridis, for one, told the IDRC’s Global Risk Forum (GRF) panel that his Miami-based Southern Region Command plays an increasingly active logistics role in the Caribbean and Latin America. But the American forces now work closely with civilian agencies and NGOs on projects more humanitarian than military. The Haitian catastrophe was one of them.

“We need to respond to disasters – but also the day-to-day needs of places like Haiti, the floods in Poland, and deaths in the São Paulo slums, where people are living below the poverty line.”

This means working closely with agencies like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), NGOs, and relief agencies around the world.

“We’re good at launching missiles. That’s what we’re good at,” Stavridis told his Davos audience. “But I think we should be engaged in launching ideas as well.

“Collectively,” he added, pointing to a Power Point graphic, “it’s about linking countries, agencies, and symbols in the private sector that need integration in the process.”

Referring to the current BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Stavridis said he would be adding a new task to his command’s logistics list: oil clearance.

The ICRC too used the Haiti disaster to describe its global relief role. The international Red Cross/Red Crescent office director in Berne, Martin Fuhrer recalled how his staff had set up its Port au Prince distribution point on a soccer field shared with Admiral Stavridis’ relief team,

Reminding the IDRC audience that the Red Cross’ own Haitian offices had been levelled by the earthquake – a event that killed 10 office volunteers – Fuhrer echoed Stavridis’ message: “We have to work together – not independently.”

This approach also won the approval of Anisya Thomas-Fritz, co-founder of the San Francisco-based Fritz foundation, and Rome-based logistics specialist of the World Food Programme Bernard Chomillier. Both panellists champion use of collaborative strategies that identify the best role for local relief specialists in field operations.

Thomas Fritz described how her foundation had focused on training and certifying logistics specialists, urging them to form networks with cooperating agencies. This training now occurs at some 10 or 12 universities – an exercise in transforming theory into practice.

“We want to transfer expertise to the field,” she explained. “It’s important to involve the business community, but it’s also vital to listen to local input. Logistics can be very humbling. We really have to be masterful about understanding local cultures instead of imposing our approach on them.”



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Cromillier too stresses the role of standby partners and expert pools working with both civilians and military troops.

“We’re creating a competency network in each of our task area,” he said. One in Mombasa, Kenya, is training now with readiness and response exercises also involving U.S. and African military units trained in disaster management.

Lyn Shepard, Conference Journalist

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