

Humanitarian Relief in Haiti, 2010: Honing the Partnership between the US Air Force and the UN*

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The recent interaction between the United States Air Force (USAF) and UN organizations and personnel during the 2010 Haiti Earthquake relief effort points to a further opportunity to refine their ability to partner in future humanitarian relief (HR) operations. During the Haiti operation, UN and USAF personnel cooperated to a greater degree than they had in years, both in the field and at a key operational headquarters. The exceptional circumstances of the emergency mandated this close cooperation. Logistically, the early weeks of the Haiti relief constituted a High-intensity, Restricted-infrastructure (HIRI) airlift operation. With the main seaport inoperative, large quantities of relief supplies had to move through Port-au-Prince's Toussaint Louverture International Airport (International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) airport identifier: MTPP). In short order, the press of government, chartered, and private aircraft trying to get into the field overwhelmed its ground infrastructure and created a hazardous air safety environment. Too battered by the disaster to deal with the situation itself, the Haitian government placed control of access to the airport and ground operations on the main parking ramp in the hands of USAF organizations engaged in the relief effort. When faced by growing criticisms of its efforts to prioritize access to the airport by aircraft operated by dozens of governments and civil relief agencies, the USAF for the first time invited the UN World Food Programme's Humanitarian Air Services (UNHAS) into its regional headquarters to supervise the lift. The spirit and mixed results of this effort point to an opportunity and need to normalize USAF and UN cooperation in future HIRI–HR efforts.

Normalizing the USAF and United Nations relationship could come in the form of institutional, doctrinal, and/or personnel changes and improvements. Institutional changes would include altering and/or creating organizations to improve the mechanisms by which the United Nations and USAF relate in airlift matters. Doctrinal changes probably would involve formal changes in procedures, while human changes likely would involve specialized training and focused selection of liaison and staff personnel. At one extreme, the US Department of Defense (DOD) might direct its Air Force to create a dedicated organization focused on facilitating humanitarian relief coordination. At the other extreme, each organization simply might train its personnel to understand and work more effectively with those of the other.

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To assess which of these three options or, more likely, what mix of them will be most effective, this analysis will have three parts. The first will be a description of the background of the UN–USAF relationship in the realm of HR airlift operations. The second part will provide a brief discussion of UN–USAF coordination during the Haiti airlift. The final part will assess the implications of that coordination and suggest directions for improving it in future HIRI emergencies. In keeping with the principle of economy of effort, these suggestions for new directions actually will be quite modest. In retrospect, UN–USAF cooperation during the Haiti crisis was effective, if somewhat delayed in coming into play. Consequently, the experience points to a need for some doctrinal refinement, some adjustments in organizational and individual training, and perhaps the creation of a contingency organization to be consolidated and activated in future crises.

The Relationship: Long but not Particularly Deep

The historical relationship between the USAF’s airlift commands and the United Nations goes back to the very foundation of the international organization. Indeed, many of the delegates to the San Francisco Conference of 1945 traveled on USAF Air Transport Command aircraft. Through the 1960s, the two organizations cooperated frequently. Operation New Tape was the highlight of this interaction. Between 1961 and 1964, the USAF flew 2,128 missions in support of the UN peacekeeping mission in the Congo, ultimately carrying 63,798 passengers and 18,593 t of cargo.¹ Around the world, American and UN conflict resolution and humanitarian relief policies paralleled one another and the long-range air transport capabilities of the USAF’s Military Air Transport Service were unique in their scale and availability. For a number of reasons, this relationship weakened during the 1970s. Administrative changes in the way USAF airlift was financed made it less affordable and available to non-Defense Department users, including US agencies and foreign governments. UN and US humanitarian assistance policies drifted apart, with the former focusing on human relief and the latter integrating that objective with the promotion of US national security. Nevertheless, UN personnel and American airmen frequently found themselves working side by side in peacekeeping and HR operations; usually in cooperation, but sometimes at cross purposes.

By the turn of the millennium the infrequent and sometimes rocky interaction between the United States and the United Nations had exacted a toll. A RAND study at the time summarized the relationship between the American military and the community of civil relief organizations as characterized by a “mutual lack of familiarity” and “little understanding of each other’s organization and procedures”.² Throughout their report, the RAND researchers argued that opportunities for improved peacekeeping and humanitarian operations were lost because both sides of the relationship disliked and were suspicious of the other. American airmen saw the personnel of the United Nations and those of the general community of nongovernmental and private volunteer organizations (NGOs and PVOs) as Byzantine in their disorganization and feckless or unfriendly politically. Civil relief personnel, including those in the United Nations, understood that the priority of American military personnel in peacekeeping and even

humanitarian operations is the achievement of United States rather than international policy objectives. They also were uncomfortable or intimidated by displays of uniforms, weapons, hierarchical organization, and force protection measures.³

In keeping with their general discomfort with the employment of military forces in humanitarian relief, the United Nations and probably most other civil relief organizations endorse the so-called Oslo Guidelines. First sponsored by the United Nations in 1994, these guidelines provide that uniformed Military and Civil Defense Assets (MCDA):

should be employed by humanitarian agencies as a last resort, that is, only in the absence of any other available civilian alternative to support urgent humanitarian needs in the time required. Any use of MCDA ... should be ... clearly limited in time and scale and present an exit strategy element that defines how the function it undertakes could ... be undertaken by civilian personnel.

Thus, though it could not prevent military forces from entering a conflict or disaster area without UN sponsorship, the organization would not invite, endorse, or align itself with them, if doing so undermined its humanitarian principles, endangered its neutrality, or threatened civil control.⁴ By implication, then, UN policy generally views the presence of uniformed military personnel, including those conducting airlift operations, as an undesirable though sometimes unavoidable feature of specific missions.

In addition to worries about neutrality and civil control, self-interest feeds the reluctance of the United Nations and other civil HR organizations to see American military assets flood into a disaster area, particularly if they are not under UN control. There are thousands of participants in the humanitarian relief industry; including 10,000–20,000 NGOs and PVOs, dozens of governments, international alliances, individual corporations, sincere or merely grandstanding politicians and celebrities, and others. Some of the NGOs and PVOs field relief programs nearly as large as those of the United Nations, with thousands of employees and large budgets, and some are as small as husband and wife missionary teams working on shoestrings. All are locked in continual quests for funding and other forms of support, usually in direct competition with at least some other organizations. Success in this competition depends on gaining access to funds and support, which result from effective field operations and self-promotion. High visibility disaster relief activities provide excellent opportunities for organizations to gain visibility and credibility with donors. As a consequence, even relief organizations that had no prior engagement in a place like Haiti will flock by the hundreds to do good and, at least secondarily, gain notice in the media frenzy.

The United Nations does pretty well in this competition. Its charter to provide humanitarian relief, prestige, global access, and specialized relief organizations usually place it at the top of the churning heap of competing organizations. Moreover, UN agencies and personnel are deployed worldwide. In the case of Haiti, a large UN contingent had been present in the country for years, its most recent incarnation being the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). This presence meant, first, that many UN workers died in the earthquake; and second, that UN leaders had direct access to surviving senior government officials. Thus, as is

often the case, the United Nations enjoyed the position of “senior lodger” in the Haiti relief; occupying a position of more or less natural leadership among many of the smaller NGOs and PVOs in the area. That status, along with its experienced personnel and “UN”-emblazoned vehicles and aircraft made it highly visible and credible. Its only real competition for “being in charge” came from the large military contingents arriving in the area, as in the case of the United States and Haiti. The flags, tent cities, energetic soldiers, photogenic generals, and big aircraft of the military contingents drew the cameras away from the United Nations, except to show it as the recipient of the military’s largesse. Given the impact such a diminished stature can have on future prestige, donations, and its long-term development plans, it is little wonder that the UN’s general policy is to accept military support only reluctantly and to send it away as soon as possible.

In this goal of minimizing military involvement, United Nations and American policy are in complete accord. Department of Defense policies recognize that the military’s “unmatched capabilities in logistics, command and control communications, and mobility are able to provide rapid and robust response”.⁵ But they also emphasize that those capabilities will only be committed at the request of the Department of State, which would have to pay for them, and that the DOD’s response would be “subject to overriding military requirements”.⁶ The DOD also endorses the Oslo Guidelines explicitly, including the proviso for clear exit strategies to hand operations over to civilians as quickly as possible.⁷

The challenge of these operations for the US military usually does not lie in their scale. While the USAF historically participates in 20 or 30 relief operations a year, most are small. They involve only handfuls of airlift sorties and deployments of small medical, engineer, logistics, or other units for a few days or weeks. Only a few relief efforts, such as Operation Unified Response, the Haiti relief, are large. In support of Unified Response the USAF drew personnel and materiel resources from 53 of its wings to support US Joint Task Force – Haiti (JTF-H), activated by the US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) to handle on-scene operations. In total about 3,330 US military-controlled aircraft sorties delivered about 31,000 tons of cargo into Haiti under JTF-H control.⁸ On its part alone, the USAF’s primary airlift arm, the Air Mobility Command (AMC), put in about 2,680 military and commercial charter aircraft sorties to move 26,781 passengers and 14,135 tons of cargo into and out of the area.⁹ During the first 5 weeks of the operation the total relief flow averaged around 82 large aircraft transiting MTPP per day; of which about 35 were commercial charters, 32 were international civil and military aircraft, and 15 were US military.¹⁰ Fifteen daily missions was not a daunting number for a command having access to nearly 1,000 large military and Civil Reserve Airlift Fleet aircraft. But even this relatively small event imposed disproportionate strain, because the AMC system routinely operates fully tasked by its day-to-day commitments. There is no component of the US airlift system sitting in reserve. Virtually every AMC and theater-assigned transport aircraft is committed every day providing logistics support for ongoing conflicts and contingencies, supporting the routine logistics of a global military system, conducting training, or undergoing maintenance. So despite its access to so many resources, Haiti was a zero-sum game for US airlift forces and obliged AMC to rob other missions and operational commands to find aircraft. Expressing the practical reality of this game, the Commander of AMC’s Tanker Airlift Control Center, Major General Brooks Bash, recounted

that while Haiti was but a “blip on the scope” of AMC’s daily schedule, the command still had to borrow C17s from the Air Education and Training Command and Pacific Air Forces to fill the gap.¹¹

The costs of AMC operations also influence its HR activities and its availability to outside users. AMC airlift operations are financed in two ways. To conduct training, maintenance, and some exercise operations, AMC receives an annual budget allocation for Operations and Maintenance. But most operations for the movement of passengers and cargo are financed by the organizations supported by them, through payments to the DOD Transportation Working Capital Fund. This is a revolving fund within a broader DOD industrial funding system for logistics, transportation, and other activities. As would any civil carrier, AMC keeps “solvent” by charging users to recover the operational, maintenance, amortization, and personnel costs of the airplanes they charter.¹² Currently, non US government organizations pay US\$7,580 per flight hr for C130s and US\$20,421 for C-17s. These rates are comparable to the US\$23–28,000 per hr charged for a Boeing 747 on the commercial market. For this reason, the United Nations and other relief organizations prefer to charter civil carriers to move their cargoes – they are cheaper and AMC aircraft usually are not available to them anyway.

Although not precisely germane to the present discussion, it is useful to understand that the United Nations provides most of its own humanitarian airlift requirements through long-term charters. Under normal circumstances, the UNHAS organization, a component of the UN World Food Programme, provides routine, regional passenger and cargo airlift for UN and other relief organizations worldwide. UNHAS operates over 50 aircraft under long-term charters, augmented by short term contracts. Most of these aircraft are small single- and twin-engine aircraft, though UNHAS does charter larger aircraft for “strategic” missions and to move larger amounts of cargo in emergencies. Generally, however, UNHAS provides passenger and high-priority cargo movements to augment surface modes and to cover the distances from major airports to isolated humanitarian operations locations. In 2009 UNHAS transported 323,714 passengers and 12,412 tons of cargo in support of over 700 different agencies.¹³ Not a lot in comparison to the capabilities of national air forces, perhaps, but vital in the support of long-term relief and development programs. See Chapter 6 for more on UNHAS.

These issues of conflicting cultures, competition for visibility and influence, and economics, largely account for the historic coolness between the United Nations and the various elements of the US military that come in contact with it. The United Nations shares the uneasiness and suspicion of most civil relief agencies towards military presence in humanitarian operations. Most military organizations, if not all military personnel involved, reciprocate. At the same time, the military understands that the United Nations usually is the first among equals in large humanitarian activities. But it is only first among *equals*; it does not run the show. Consequently, a key challenge for American and other military forces in each new humanitarian relief operation is to figure out the real balance of power among the many civil organizations present or arriving from all directions. Thus, US Joint Doctrine Publication 3–29, “Foreign Humanitarian Assistance”, advises Joint Force Commanders in their initial planning to find out:¹⁴

- Who are the relevant governmental and non-governmental actors in the operational area? What are their objectives? Are their objectives at odds or compatible with the Joint Force Commanders' objectives?
- Who are the key communicators (persons who hold the ear of the populace, for example, mayors, village elders, teachers) within the operational area?
- What relief agencies are in place, what are their roles and capabilities, and what resources do they have?

Finally, UN and military forces in most cases arrive at disaster locations independently and with little interdependence logistically or interest in interacting beyond, perhaps, information sharing and coordinating distribution efforts. Of course, in exceptional circumstances like the relief of Haiti, pragmatic concessions to this distant relationship can be necessary.

Operation Unified Response: A High-intensity, Limited Infrastructure Incident

For the most part, the US government committed to, organized, and executed Operation Unified Response in accordance with an explicit body of policy and doctrinal guidance. This body of guidance begins with congressional legislative acts and presidential directives. It filters down through DOD directives, Joint Doctrine Publications, and handbooks and guides for various participants.¹⁵ This body of literature generally fit the circumstances of Haiti well. Though large in scale and particularly tragic in the casualties it produced, the Haiti earthquake of 12 January 2010 presented the American military with an almost routine problem of responding, conducting rescue operations, mitigating secondary social and health effects, and generally giving the Haiti government time to reorganize itself. The United States and most developed countries in the world had participated in such activities many times before. But there was one wrinkle to the norm – the infrastructure available to support transport operations was restricted to an exceptional degree in relation to need. Haiti's only developed deep water port was heavily damaged and inoperable, and its national airport, Toussaint Louverture, was inadequate to handle the flood of aircraft about to descend on it. It would be this challenge of conducting high intensity operations into a restricted airfield infrastructure that would push the United Nations and the USAF into an unusually close working relationship and, thereby, point to a need and opportunity to normalize that closeness.

The various components of the US government involved in crisis relief responded to the news of the Haiti disaster with practiced choreography. President Barack Obama immediately pledged massive support and dispatched a personal representative to survey the situation. After meeting with the National Security Council, he directed the Department of State to take its accustomed lead of the relief effort. Also as normal, the task of coordinating the interagency response fell on the

United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Explaining the importance of the US role, the president announced a few days later that:

our nation has a unique capacity to reach out quickly and broadly to deliver assistance that can save lives. That responsibility obviously is magnified when the devastation that's been suffered is so near to us.¹⁶

In support of the Department of State, the Defense Department issued a warning order on 13 January 2010 to the Combatant Commands that would have direct roles in the relief effort. USSOUTHCOM received overall military lead, since Haiti was within its geographic area of operation. The United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) was responsible for organizing air and sea lines of communications and ports in support of USSOUTHCOM and the overall relief effort. The Commander of USTRANSCOM, General Duncan J. McNabb, gave verbal guidance to his component commands to get moving, and followed up with an execute order early on the 14th.¹⁷ The need for quick action was becoming more apparent by the hour, as the world became aware of the extent of the devastation. Compounding the problem, the government of Haiti (GoH) and many relief organizations normally present in the country, including the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), had suffered many casualties and were struggling to reorganize and recover their morale, even as they began rescue and relief activities.

Even before formal orders came down USAF operational commands took initial steps to mitigate suffering and to posture themselves for the big push. USSOUTHCOM's air component (AFSOUTH) is the Twelfth Air Force based at Davis–Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona. Lieutenant General Glenn F. Spears, AFSOUTH Commander, asked AMC for airlift planning and operations experts to beef up the Air Mobility Division of his Air and Space Operations Center (ASOC). He also asked for a senior Director of Mobility Forces to provide him with expert advice and coordinating authority. AMC sent out Brigadier General Robert K. Millmann Jr, who was the Air Force Reserve mobilization assistant to AMC's Eighteenth Air Force Commander and had directed airlift operations during several previous disaster relief efforts.¹⁸

AMC operations began on 13 January, when a KC-135R tanker refueled two Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) MC-130 aircraft carrying a team of tactical air traffic controllers to Toussaint Louverture Airport to re-establish air traffic control. Under the direction of Chief Master Sergeant Antonio D. Travis, the AFSOC team set up a card table at the edge of the runway and began controlling the traffic pattern with portable radios only 28 minutes after arriving.¹⁹ The next day, an AMC C-17A delivered an urban rescue team into Toussaint, the first tangible US aid to arrive. While all of these activities were underway, AMC operations personnel were putting aircrews into rest, requesting loans of seven C-17s from Pacific Air Forces and six from the Air Education and Training Command; and organizing Homestead Air Reserve Base, Florida, and Charleston Air Force Base, North Carolina, as the primary Aerial Ports of Debarkation for Unified Response. Posturing AMC for a major operation into Port-au-Prince was a formidable task, since the command was “pretty much maxing out” already with the movement of “surge” forces to Afghanistan.²⁰

AMC's preparations allowed it to begin moving ground support elements into Toussaint on the heels of USTRANSCOM's warning order. A 13-person Joint Assessment Team from the 621st Contingency Response Wing arrived later in the morning of the 13th to begin assessing the condition of the airport and its readiness to begin receiving heavy aircraft. Eight hours later, the first 21 members and 44 tons of cargo from the 621st Wing's 818th Contingency Response Group (CRG) arrived from McGuire Air Force Base (AFB), New Jersey, to begin organizing aircraft parking and unloading operations for AMC aircraft and any other planes coming in. Eventually, the CRG's contingent would grow to over 200 members.

The CRG personnel discovered a situation in immediate need of the kind of organization they were trained to impose on contingency airfields in combat and non-combat situations. The Port-au-Prince ramp was crowded already with other-nation military and civil relief aircraft and a chaos of vehicles and crowds of people wandering around. The small parking ramp was saturated with aircraft, and more were coming in. Many of the aircraft were filled with piece cargo, and there were no organized teams to unload them. Determined to bring some order to the hubbub, the CRG's personnel began setting up camp, while their leaders discussed control arrangements with airport authorities. By the next day, the 818th CRG was in control of ramp and unloading operations, the AFSOC air traffic specialists were providing positive control of arriving aircraft, the US Army's 688th Rapid Port Opening Element was arriving to move cargo from the Toussaint ramp to a USAID-controlled distribution point nearer the city, and USAF Security Forces were patrolling the airport and its perimeter.²¹

By that time, AFSOUTH had certified that under CRG and AFSOC control, Toussaint could handle 90 flights per day, compared to the 25 handled under normal circumstances. Very visibly, the Americans had taken control of airlift relief at MTPP.

Also beginning on 14 January 2010, AFSOUTH and the GoH took actions to gain control of the flow of aircraft into Haiti. Knowing that his own headquarters at AFSOUTH did not possess the capabilities needed, General Spears asked the First Air Force, the air component of United States Northern Command (AFNORTH), for help. AFNORTH had two mobility-related resources of immediate value to the building airlift. Colonel Warren Hurst, its Deputy Director of Mobility Forces, was involved already, coordinating between AFSOUTH, SOUTHCOM, and AMC on mobility issues, setting up an Aerial Port of Debarkation at Homestead AFB, Florida. Within the Air Mobility Division of its Air and Space Operations Center, AFNORTH also possessed the only standing Regional Air Mobility Control Center (RAMCC) in the USAF. On behalf of their Joint Combatant Commands, overseas Air Force components had established temporary RAMCCs to supervise relief operations into Bosnia in the mid-1990s and in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s. But given its more or less continual obligation to respond to natural disasters in the United States, AFNORTH organized the 601st RAMCC on a permanent basis in 2007. Thus, when the earth heaved in Haiti in 2010, the 601st possessed the trained personnel, procedures, and communications capabilities needed to receive access requests from the dozens of operators wanting into Toussaint and assigning them arrival slot times.

The availability of the 601st RAMCC allowed Haitian President René Prével to authorize the US DOD to prioritize fixed-wing flight arrivals and departures at MTPP to facilitate the distribution of relief supplies as quickly as possible.²² At the same time President Prével made

it clear that Haitian sovereignty over its airspace remained intact. After signing the memorandum of understanding releasing control to the Americans, he verbally stipulated to American leaders that Haiti would resume control if he sensed that the airflow and/or airfield were being managed improperly, or if Haiti's desires were being ignored, or if individuals he identified, particularly the First Lady of Haiti, were being denied unrestricted access to the airport.²³ In keeping with these stipulations, AFNORTH re-designated the 601st RAMCC as the Provisional Haiti Flight Operations Coordination Center (HFOCC). The name change was useful; first because it clarified that the Center was coordinating and not controlling anyone's aircraft directly, and because it made the organization's role clearer to non-USAF operators.

The RAMCC's mechanisms for controlling the flow of aircraft into Port-au-Prince were apportionments and prioritization. For the HFOCC, apportionment meant "the percentage or number of contingency ramp slots allocated in advance to a specific category or agency". Initially the HFOCC Chief, Lieutenant Colonel Bradley G. Graff, planned to allocate 50 percent of all slots to American military and civil aircraft, and 50 percent to all other categories. But these percentages were only general guides, subject to the more precise task of prioritization; establishing "a current and specific ranking of what relief supplies are needed in the disaster".²⁴ In the first days of the emergency, the HFOCC staff broadly prioritized slot-time requests in accordance with a list it had developed from experience with previous emergencies. In short order, however, the standing list was superseded by priority lists arriving from SOUTHCOM, the United Nations, the World Food Programme, and USAID.

Prioritization, nevertheless, remained a challenge for Colonel Graff and the HFOCC staff, until the declining pace of operations in late January mooted the issue. Most importantly, as Director of Mobility Forces, General Millmann later reported, the lists of SOUTHCOM, the United Nations, the World Food Programme, and USAID usually "did not line up".²⁵ The tyranny of time also obliged the HFOCC staff to grant slot times to requesters as they called in, without the luxury of waiting for later callers who might have more immediately important loads to deliver. The staffers did not want to resort to first-come-first-served allocations, but their reality was that the requests came in on that basis and they could not hold approvals in escrow until they could build a completely rationalized flow plan. Moreover, ad hoc demands for priority access came from many aid organizations, DOD, and GoH. These demands were troublesome since, once slots were assigned to users on the basis of the primary priority list, it was almost impossible to shift them to satisfy later requests coming in from such authoritative organizations. The imperative to pump as many aircraft as possible through the MTPP main ramp only intensified the pressure on the HFOCC. Literally, a delay in granting a slot time or mishandling a request could mean suffering and death for Haitians already on the edge of survival.²⁶

The deployment of 4,000 soldiers of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the US 82nd Airborne Division greatly complicated the prioritization task and provided a major point of misunderstanding over the HFOCC's management of the relief airlift flow. Partly as a more or less automatic response in such situations, and partly out of specific fears that Port-au-Prince would descend into chaos, the US government began sending airborne units to Haiti on 14 January 2010. From the start, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, made it clear that the 82nd's movement was his number one priority. Responding

accordingly, USTRANSCOM directed the 618th Tanker Airlift Control Center at Scott AFB, Illinois, to wedge the necessary 91 C-17 sorties into the schedule. According to the Vice Commander of the Tanker Airlift Control Center, Brigadier General Randy A. Kee:

that was a mountain of stuff ... that became, for us, the number one priority. We still had only so many slots ... [so] we had to wedge priorities ... giving priority to the priority.

For the HFOCC, the movement of the 82nd simply changed the make-up of the American share of the overall airlift flow. Otherwise, it simply continued to meter the flow of American aircraft in accordance with the 50 percent allocation it had given them already. So, whatever the merit of many changes at the time and after that, the deployment of an entire brigade was unnecessary or nefarious, there was no change in the apportionment of slots to the United States. The diversion of slots to the US Army undoubtedly delayed the initial deliveries of relief supplies by US aircraft. But, in coordination with the GoH, the United States felt that such security was a necessary precaution, given the circumstances.²⁷

While aware that they were not fully qualified to “take the list of all the flights and put it in order of most important to least important”, the HFOCC team also knew that the task was theirs to perform.²⁸ So its members employed several techniques that allowed them to grant thousands of slot times in the first days of the emergency, while still preserving some ability to adjust to changes in priorities. Most importantly, the team withheld 10 percent of all slot times available until they had to release them or risk having parking spaces go empty at MTPP. These “withholds” allowed the HFOCC to accommodate late requests of suitable priority, while minimizing the chance that they might restrict the flow of relief supplies. In exceptional cases, the HFOCC also canceled previously awarded slot times to let very high priority missions slip in. If it actually became necessary to divert aircraft in flight, the HFOCC usually sent US military aircraft away. Military operators, HFOCC staffers reasoned, were better able to handle the financial and operational impacts of having to go home and wait for another turn into the field. When, two weeks into the operation, the no-show rate of aircraft with assigned slot times began to approach 25 percent of total sorties scheduled, the RAMCC also began to call all no-shows and to confirm all jumbo jet arrivals 48 hours in advance. Overall, the HFOCC team later assessed that these procedures markedly reduced wasted parking slots, kept the relief airlift operating at least in rough conformity with generally agreed-upon priorities, and further increased the capacity of MTPP to 170 large aircraft arrivals per day.²⁹

Not everyone respected and/or cooperated willingly with the slot system and US control of it. Determined to deliver their specific loads, and always aware of the competition for impact and visibility among civil relief agencies, many NGOs, PVOs, and other governments chafed at the need to request and accept slot times from an American military control agency. Some organizations, government leaders, celebrities, and politicians simply went “up channels” to find a senior government official or military commander to impose their requested slot times on the HFOCC staff. A few arrived at Toussaint and simply left their planes and crews sitting in a parking spot while they went into the city to do their business. During the first couple of days after the HFOCC began operating, a few relief organizations failed or refused to obtain slots and, if no parking spaces were available, were sent away by air traffic control in accordance

with President Préval's guidance. The Haitian government also retained control over some of the parking spots on the Toussaint ramp for its own purposes, mainly to accommodate aircraft used by the President, his wife, and other favored individuals and groups. This practice, while legitimate enough, did make it difficult at times for the HFOCC to ensure that the reserved parking spots did not go to waste.³⁰

Within the bounds of their status as subordinate military organizations, AFSOUTH, the HFOCC, and American troops on the ground did their best to dispel fears that they were prioritizing access to Toussaint unfairly or for imperial purposes. This took a team effort of many parts. At the center, Colonel Graff ensured that all slot-time allocations were defensible in terms of established priorities or the ad hoc needs of the relief effort. For his part, Brigadier General Robert Millmann, the AFSOUTH Director of Mobility Forces, gave candid interviews to explain the “good, bad, and ugly” of the operation. Only three days into the HFOCC's slot-time regime, 52 percent of the planes going into Toussaint were:

from US and International civil relief organizations, 22 percent from the US military, and 18 percent from individuals and organizations approved directly by the GoH, and the rest from unidentified or unidentifiable sources.³¹

Air Force controllers also did their best to let as many smaller aircraft into Toussaint as possible, so long as they could park in grass areas, rather than on the fully occupied paved ramp controlled by the 818 CRG. In reality, the whole control system was based on managing the utilization of that precious ramp space, not on the ability of Haiti airspace to handle aircraft – a point often missed by organizations interested only in getting in their specific, “top priority” cargoes. The crowded airport is seen in [Figure 5.1](#) opposite.



Figure 5.1 A US helicopter leaves the crowded Port-au-Prince airport with relief supplies
Source: UN Photo 425706, 20 January 2010.

Nevertheless, the presence of a large US military force on the ground and the involvement of an Air Force headquarters staff in the allocation of slot times prompted a firestorm of complaints from governments and organizations philosophically and/or politically unfriendly to the United States. The leaders of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua declared that the slot times and the growing numbers of US troops on the ground indicated that, in the words of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, “the United States was taking hold of Haiti over the bodies and tears of its people”.³² Individual French and Italian officials also criticized the US “occupation” of Haiti and its alleged refusal to grant landing rights to several relief agencies.³³ In one case, the HFOCC was forced by a full ramp to refuse landing permission to a Doctors Without Borders flight arriving without a slot time. Over the next several days the organization claimed that five of its flights had been turned back and that some of its patients had died as a consequence.³⁴ Things were not helped by *Time Magazine*’s well-meaning declaration that:

Haiti, for all intents and purposes, became the 51st state at 4:53 p.m. Tuesday [15 January 2010] in the wake of its deadly earthquake. If not a state, then at least a ward of the state – the United States – as Washington mobilized national resources to rush urgent aid to Haiti’s stricken people.³⁵

It appeared that, in the case of the HFOCC and the US intervention in general, the “Law of Unintended Consequences” was quite active.

The political heat and challenge of determining priorities led AFSOUTH and AFNORTH to take the unprecedented step of inviting the United Nations into the RAMCC to coordinate slot times. In recognition of the usually awkward relationships between American military personnel and the civilian relief agencies, American doctrine seeks to keep their interactions discreet and on an as-needed basis. Normally Joint Force Commanders establish Civil–Military Operations Centers as meeting venues for relief workers and military personnel to exchange information and coordinate planning. American military doctrine stipulates that Civil–Military Operations Centers be kept physically separate from military headquarters to spare civil personnel the necessity of appearing to be entangled with the military effort. So the notion of bringing a specific civil relief organization into an operational headquarters was something new, even if it involved an organization with the credibility and expertise of the United Nations. But circumstances were pressing and no civil organization was more qualified to integrate its personnel into the RAMCC than the UNHAS. Its personnel were experienced with planning and conducting crisis and routine airlift support of peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. Welcoming the opportunity to improve the “synchronization” of civil and military airlift efforts, the World Food Programme sent in Philippe Martou, Deputy Chief of the UNHAS, and two assistants, Mike Whiting and Albert Rieger, to the HFOCC, which was located at Tyndall AFB in the Florida Panhandle, on 24 January 2010.

By the time the UNHAS team arrived at Tyndall on 24 January, the airlift crisis was past its peak, but there still were plenty of problems. Outside, complaints of American intentions and bias continued, while no shows and empty parking slots were becoming major concerns. The UNHAS and HFOCC personnel took over slot-time coordination and continued the practices of following up on no-shows and calling jumbo jet operators 48 hours prior to their scheduled arrivals. The UNHAS also became the HFOCC’s conduit to UN relief teams in Haiti, the GoH, and the NGO/PVO community to coordinate priorities and assess the value of specific loads. Although late to come together, Philippe Martou assessed that:

this unprecedented relationship ... significantly added to the unity of effort between civil and military aviation ... [and as] a template for future combined civil–military aviation operations would enhance rapid response capability ... and ensure synchronized processes.³⁶

In the end, the overall relief airlift effort was successful. USAF and Royal Canadian Air Force units opened several additional airfields. The USAF 615th Contingency Response Element opened the Dominican Republic’s San Isidro Air Base on 16 January to handle limited air cargo deliveries for onward movement into Haiti by road. The Air National Guard’s 123 Contingency Response Element opened Maria Montez Airport on the 23 January 2010. Meanwhile, the Canadian Forces opened up Jacmel Airport on the south coast to CC-130 operations on 21st. In total, the Canadian Forces, in what it called Operation Hestia, airlifted 2,600 t of cargo and 5,447 passengers into and out of Haiti by strategic airlift and another 250 tons by helicopters deployed into the country or operated from offshore frigates.³⁷ These accomplishments and those of the overall international relief effort undoubtedly saved hundreds of thousands of Haitian lives. That this record was not marred by a single aircraft accident in the hazardous operating environments

of Haiti's airspace and airports is further testimony to the effectiveness of the American control teams, the 818th CRG's ramp operations, and the professionalism of the pilots involved.

Implications

This present assessment earlier asked whether normalization of the USAF–UN relationship in humanitarian airlift operations would take the form of institutional, doctrinal, and/or personnel changes and improvements. It pursued this question by, first, examining the normal state of UN–USAF relations and then examining the specific circumstances and events of the Haiti relief effort. In sum, these examinations suggest that the overall organizational and human preparations for such operations worked well for both organizations. But they also revealed problems in coordination and prioritization that might best be addressed through a combination of modest reforms in all three areas.

Organizationally, neither the United Nations nor the USAF is likely to see a need to make major internal organizational adjustments in response to the 2010 Haiti experience. Despite devastating losses to its personnel in Haiti at the time of the quake, the UN's mechanisms for disaster response functioned effectively. Similarly, the US DOD, including the USAF, demonstrated alacrity and effectiveness in mobilizing units designed for combat operations and applying them as an effective team to rescue and disaster relief activities. On the ground in Haiti, both organizations set up operations quickly and seem to have interfaced effectively when and where needed. Working relations between UN and USAF personnel also seem to have been good in the realm of coordinating air transport operations. Anecdotally, some US military personnel had less than positive interactions with the personnel of other NGO and PVO organizations over things like arrival priorities and distribution procedures. But, again, no institutional or individual complaints of bad relations between the professionals of the UNHAS have emerged in the hard or soft media to challenge Phillippe Martou's report that "it was a privilege and pleasure to work with the US military ... with whom we developed a great friendship and intend to continue our collaboration".³⁸

The doctrinal question remains about what to do about air transport access apportionment and priorities in complex humanitarian relief situations. Clearly, the assumption of apportionment and slot-time control by the RAMCC was expedient and helpful. But military controllers were not prepared to make such decisions with confidence. They knew or developed procedures for receiving, filling, and coordinating slot-time requests readily enough. After all, planning and controlling an airlift flow into Haiti was no more than a variation of military airlift planning and operations in general. But the military controllers simply would have been well out of their realms of expertise had they tried to adjudicate among competing requests from a cloud of NGOs, PVOs, and others clamoring for priority treatment. Apart from the larger organizations like the United Nations they did not know who they were dealing with or precisely how important their cargos were for the relief effort at any given moment. So to provide the necessary technical expertise and to quiet the political

clamor resulting from the US military's early efforts, AFNORTH and AFSOUTH invited UNHAS into the RAMCC. Phillippe Martou and his team brought much needed expertise and political savvy to the operation, but not until the worst of the crisis was passed and the airlift was stabilizing.

United Nations and USAF after-action reports tend to focus on the UNHAS' late-to-game arrival at the RAMCC. "In the future", suggested the Haiti Flight Operations Coordination Center official history:

it is recommended that a non-biased entity ... work closely with the RAMCC to determine aircraft priorities ... [and] be brought into the fold from the onset of any operation, as the highest demand for slots is in the first few days.³⁹

Similarly, Phillippe Martou suggested in his assessment of Operation Unified Response that:

the ability of the humanitarian community to respond quickly and effectively is limited. ... Thus, ... dependence on the trained manpower and the logistics infrastructure of the military is increasing ... [so] [t]here needs to be greater engagement to better leverage their combined capabilities.

Accordingly, Martou recommended a number of civil-military initiatives to make coordination in future contingencies smoother and quicker.⁴⁰

Based on the experience, however, it seems that these assessments miss what perhaps is the most important lesson of the UN-USAf partnership: Neither organization is constituted to arbitrate airport access priorities in a disaster. Only the host nation government has the legal authority to set and enforce landing rights within its borders, even in a disaster situation. The air traffic control arrangements set up for Haiti during the first weeks of the emergency respected the government's sovereignty and authority, of course. But they also moved the USAf-UNHAS team to the foreground of prioritizing slot-time requests for organizations that often saw one or both as biased, lacking legal footing, competing for impact and prestige, or even as a competitor. The relationship even created tensions between the GoH and its temporary air control agents, as the president and other officials overrode or ignored the slot-time procedures established at their behest. Thus, the people working in the RAMCC and the ramp at MTPP were, in effect, "front guys" for the Haitian government and easy targets for every individual, blog, NGO, PVO, or government official that had a bone to pick with their management of the airlift or with the United Nations or the United States in general.

Reasonably, then, an arrangement that kept the GoH in the spotlight in the day-to-day allocation of slot times would have mitigated the tensions resulting from the ad hoc setup actually used. Had the government possessed the expertise, which in this case it did not, it was best placed to prioritize the flow of airlift cargo in reflection of changing needs for water, food, rescue teams and equipment, emergency medical teams, construction equipment, communications equipment, hospitals, and all the other useful and non-useful things put forward by their sponsors for immediate delivery. Priorities and slot-time lists published and enforced under the government's direct imprimatur would have done much to cool the complaints and

discourage misbehavior. Foreign governments could not fault Haiti or cry “colonialism” in the face of its obvious control of its own relief. NGOs and PVOs concerned about access would have been less inclined to ignore in the immediate term the very government that would grant it access over the long term. Last, the GoH itself would at least have to accept the consequences of and responsibility for the “end runs” it authorized for favored individuals or groups, who sometimes contributed little or nothing to the immediate relief effort.

Of course, the GoH was not ready to manage the details involved in apportioning and allocating airport access during its emergency. In all likelihood, no government in a less-developed country facing a major disaster would be ready for such responsibilities. Senior officials likely would not understand the technical details of relief well enough to establish priorities. Just as likely, their governments would not contain the technical expertise and staff personnel needed to support their decision-making. So, any workable doctrinal arrangement for handling future HIRI situations should provide for establishment of appropriate advisory and technical support for the government of an afflicted state, without diluting the reality and appearance of its sovereign control of events.

Recommendation

The goal of ensuring effective control of the air transport stream into a disaster scene, without undermining the sovereignty of the receiving government, points to an organizational solution involving three parts.

- a. *Host Nation Allocation Authority*: This individual likely would come from either the Department/Ministry of Transportation, or another part of the government charged with managing internal and/or disaster affairs. The president or prime minister of the host nation should promulgate a public announcement as soon as possible to set up and empower this authority. As the host nation’s disaster relief representative, the Allocation Authority would direct, supervise, and validate the efforts of the Forward and Rear staff elements.

In the likely absence of an adequate local staff able to supervise these staff elements, afflicted host nations might well charter the United Nations Humanitarian Operation and Coordination Centre or equivalent to organize and supervise the Forward and Rear staffs and operate them as a “Logistics Management Center” in support of the Allocation Authority.

- b. *Humanitarian Operation and Coordination Center – Forward Staff*: This staff would be located as close physically to the Allocation Authority and/or the disaster site as circumstances allow. Collocation will facilitate the Forward Staff’s efforts to help the Allocation Authority assess requirements, prioritize access (slot-time) requests, and promulgate slot-time schedules. The Forward Staff also would coordinate with and validate the requirements and capabilities of military and civil relief individuals and organizations present at the disaster scene. To perform

these functions, the Forward Staff would have at least two sub-teams:

- *Access Team (Forward)*: UNHAS personnel to develop requirements, priorities, and finalize slot-time schedules for the Allocation Authority's approval;
 - *Planning Team (Forward)*: civil and military air transportation experts to coordinate slot-time requests coming through the Rear Staff, coordinate and validate on-scene requestor requirements and capabilities, and draft slot-time schedules for review by the Access Team. The Planning Team also would host daily meetings of local port authorities and relief organizations involved in airport operations to minimize the gap between plans and reality in managing the air transport flow.
- C. *Rear Staff*: This staff could be located anywhere in the world, so long as it had adequate communications to the Forward Staff and was accessible electronically to organizations requesting access to airports in disaster areas. This staff's primary role would be to receive, process, and communicate slot requests to the Forward Staff. Once the Allocating Authority approved the slot schedules developed by the Forward Staff, the Rear Staff would communicate them to the requesters and coordinate them with appropriate air traffic control and other involved agencies. To the extent possible, the Rear Staff also would handle complaints from requesters, conduct media relations, and assess and report operational results. This staff also might have two sub-teams mirroring those in the Forward Staff:
- *Access Team (Rear)*: Representatives from UNHAS and/or other appropriate civil or military organizations to conduct direct communications with organizations requesting access to airports in the disaster area, handle complaints, and coordinate with the Access Team (Forward) regarding relief priorities, offers of support, airspace and air traffic management issues.
 - *Planning Team (Rear)*: A team of civil and/or military experts to receive, organize, coordinate, and communicate access requests. Also supervises operational performance of slot-time users and assesses and reports on operational results.
 - *Allocation Authority Representative*: The host nation Allocation Authority likely would assign a direct representative to the Rear Staff to serve as a liaison officer and spokesperson for the host nation's management of the relief effort.

The excellent performance of the AFNORTH RAMCC (renamed HFOCC during the recovery operations) in hosting what amounted to the notional Rear Staff (above) suggests the possibility of assigning it the role more or less permanently.

Doing so would require: gaining US and international relief community agreement on the matter; coordinating appropriate doctrines and procedures; and staffing and equipping the RAMCC to deploy some personnel and equipment to the Forward Staff. If the US government committed to this mission, and since such forward deployments would impose some risk to other AFNORTH homeland missions, the USAF might choose other options. These could include strengthening the existing RAMCC, establishing a second one, or embedding the mission in one or more of the Air Mobility Command's contingency response groups/elements.

Since the Haiti relief effort, the USAF has taken several actions to enhance the capabilities of its RAMCC concepts. In February 2011, it updated Air Force Doctrine Document 3-52, "Airspace Control", to formalize RAMCC roles and organization, though its provisions are more pertinent to combat environments than to humanitarian relief operations.⁴¹ The air components of most joint combatant commands also have plumbed the Haiti experience and taken different degrees of action to establish core RAMCC staffs or at least train key personnel in RAMCC operations. Accordingly, several air force training organizations and programs have expanded their publication and syllabus treatments of RAMCC subjects. Thus, while USAF authority over airspace access and slot times will remain problematic for many international organizations, its ability to lead or at least augment such activities has increased markedly in recent months.⁴²

Regardless of how the international relief community works out the details, the experience of the Haiti earthquake relief operation points to a clear need for a well-planned, coordinated, and exercised international organization to control air transport flows in HIRI circumstances. The need for such a flow control organization is greatest in the first days, literally the first hours, of a disaster. So the international community must replace existing ad hoc practices with flow control arrangements based on national sovereignty and able to be activated within a few hours of notification. To work so quickly, this organizational arrangement must be understood by the international community and have a permanent existence, at least in terms of a web presence and a small staff to develop plans and documents, conduct training and exercise activities, and maintain facilities and equipment in readiness. UN disaster relief agreements with potential host nations also should identify the local government organizations, facilities, and personnel needed to host and support the Forward and Rear staffs. For the afflicted citizens sitting amid the carnage and rubble of future disasters, the effective workings of those staffs often will be matters of life or death.

Endnotes

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- ⁹ Wallwork, E.D. et al. *Operation Unified Response: Air Mobility Command’s Response to the 2010 Haiti Earthquake Crisis*, Scott Air Force Base, IL: Air Mobility Command Office of History (2010), 97. Note, these are figures updated in an email between the author and AMC historian Mr Mark Morgan on 7 June 2011 and are slightly higher than those contained in the official AMC history.
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