



Airlink connects airlines with vetted NGOs.
All photos: Airlink

When disaster strikes...

Airlink is a humanitarian relief organisation that connects airlines with vetted NGOs to assist communities in crisis, **AviTrader MRO** looks at the momentous task of rallying up responders and the vital role that aviation plays.

On September 1, 2019 Hurricane Dorian made its first landfall on Elbow Cay, in the Abacos of the north western Bahamas as a Category 5 storm. Its second landfall on Great Abaco Island near Marsh Harbour followed shortly after. The islands were battered by the major hurricane for more than 48 hours. Initial reports indicate catastrophic damage occurred with upwards of 76,000 people impacted. As part of its mission to mobilise the aviation community in times of disaster, Airlink began transporting relief workers to Florida and other east coast states prior to the storm's arrival to ensure a swift response to communities in need.

Navigating the logistics after Hurricane Dorian must have been an enormous task but Airlink President and CEO Steven J. Smith emphasises that when aid organisations partner with Airlink, they not only get free or reduced cost transportation, but as importantly, assistance overcoming logistics challenges posed by damaged infrastructure and constricted supply chains in disaster-impacted areas – “In the Bahamas, all but one small airport on the impacted islands were closed due to significant damage, debris cluttered common approaches by water and roads on the islands, and a significant amount of aid was being delivered into Nassau, which was being used as the hub of the response.”

With support from Airlink's airline partners and other donors, the organisation has transported more than 600 relief workers and 62,000 pounds of aid for nearly 30 humanitarian relief organisations responding to Hurricane Dorian – “Additionally, in our role as a convener of non-profit response partners, we supported information sharing platforms allowing partners to communicate about hard-to-reach communities, unmet needs and identify opportunities for col-

laboration in real time,” Smith mentions.

In the wake of Dorian, Airlink transported relief workers and emergency supplies by air to support the most heavily impacted areas. Airlink were assisting more than 15 response partners, including Save the Children, Empact Northwest, Heart to Heart International, and World Central Kitchen. The organisations brought wide variety of specialisations to disaster-stricken communities and provided search and rescue operations, medical care, safe spaces for children, food and clean water provisions, and other essential assistance.

With regards to disaster management, some element of pre -planning is essential despite the sheer nature of unexpected natural calamities. “Airlink has developed regional plans to help us prepare for responses in specific regions of the world, including the Caribbean. We work to understand the capabilities of our response partners, establish relationships with airlines uniquely positioned to respond in the region, and identify likely needs PRIOR to disaster.”

Hurricane Dorian was extremely slow moving and its projected path put not only The Bahamas on alert, but also most of the US southeast – “Several days before the storm made landfall, we began moving relief workers into communities in the projected path or to staging areas being used for coordination.”

Often getting the supplies and the people needed into the communities most affected is often a greater challenge than shipping the supplies to the region. Smith says responding to disasters occurring in island chains always poses unique “last mile” challenges for the partners. “In this case, we were able to transport supplies to the

capital city Nassau. From there, aid organisations relied on boats, small private airplanes and helicopters in the early days to transport supplies to the most heavily impacted areas.

“In our coordinating role, we were able to connect aid organisations with other Airlink partners like YachtAid to help with that transport. Through donor support and a new relationship with Bahamasair, we also are providing our aid organisation partners with inter-island passenger flights to ensure a sustained response to impacted communities as this response begins to transition into the recovery phase.”

As Smith points out, perhaps Airlink’s greatest impact in ensuring the supply chain functions effectively and aid reaches those in need as quickly as possible, revolves around two factors: Firstly, making sure only the highest priority supplies are carried on flights Airlink facilitates and are being sent to organisations with robust distribution plans, and secondly, helping personnel from organisations with unique skills in logistics, and resource management quickly get on the ground.

The management of aid coming from response organisations and other sources is a large task, Smith stresses, saying well-publicised, large disasters often elicit an outpouring of public support. “Ideally, that support comes in the form of cash so aid organisations can procure exactly the supplies needed for the response. In some cases, well-meaning people act by sending supplies. If those supplies don’t match needs or are not assigned to entities on the ground that can distribute them effectively, communities can be overwhelmed, and distribution impeded.”

In this response, Airlink partners like Team Rubicon and Rescue Global provided critical coordination support and organised distribution of supplies for other organisations and government entities like the National Emergency Management Agency. “Our partner Fuel Relief Fund brought and managed fuel supplies on the islands to support the mobility and work of responders. These organisations provide important logistics support that ensures needs in remote areas are identified, available resources are inventoried, and distribution channels to those most in need are established.”



Team Rubicon on the plane (Dorian)



Airlink staff with cargo heading to The Bahamas after Dorian

Also, cash donations from Airlink supporters and travel assistance from Air Canada, Alaska Airways, Bahamasair, British Airways, Fl-export, JetBlue Airways, Spirit Airlines and United Airlines, made the response possible.

Certainly, coordinating humanitarian efforts after a natural disaster can be a daunting task and there are always lessons learned in getting supplies off the ground as quickly and efficiently as possible – “To optimise humanitarian response, we must be prepared to respond quickly following an emergency. The necessary relationships, resources, processes, and technical capacity must therefore be well established and practiced in advance of crisis so that assistance can be mobilised at very short notice.”

With that in mind, Airlink has developed a regional response framework designed to inform a timely response to humanitarian crises based on distinctions in each of these six regions: Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, North America, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Smith explains that through consistent engagement of partners and vulnerable communities during non-disaster periods, the regional response framework helps Airlink build a common understanding of the coordination and aid delivery resources available, fostering a more planned and predictable response that better serves communities in crisis. “Airlink is uniquely positioned to convene aid organisations, airlines and other response actors to build partnerships and mobilise response resources and we will continue to do that in advance of the next, inevitable disasters.”

One of Airlink’s key supporters is global aviation asset management company Aero Werner Services. Mike Cazaz, CEO and President of Werner Aero Services attests that Airlink is an important organisation that helps people worldwide when it is needed most – “The work they do is extraordinary, and we are proud to support them in their disaster responses. We encourage everyone in the aviation industry to learn more about Airlink and get involved.”