

UN-backed project seeks to ensure medicines reach needy in time of crises



A child in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) receives a vaccination

27 October 2009 – The ability to safely deliver medicines during humanitarian crises around the world is just as crucial as being able to procure them, and a new United Nations-backed initiative has been launched to deal with improving that essential supply chain.

“Searing heat, long distances, damaged infrastructure and insecurity are among many challenges facing humanitarians trying to treat people affected by war and natural disasters,” the UN World Health Organization (**WHO**) said in a news release issued today on the project it has launched with sister UN agencies and other international partners.

The initiative – a Certification in Humanitarian Medical Logistics Practices (MedLog) – will train experienced logisticians and medical specialists to better handle the supply of vaccines, anti-virals and other drugs to ensure that medicines will be both delivered and administered more effectively to people in need. Many logisticians work in the humanitarian sector, but not all are trained in how to best handle the supply of medicines.

In many crises, tons of medicines are wasted due to improper handling; many are perishable and should be delivered appropriately within a “cold chain,” a temperature-controlled supply chain used to ensure their quality. If not, they may not be usable by health staff – a loss in both human and economic terms.

The distance learning course is being conducted by the Fritz Institute and the Chartered Institute of Transport and Logistics (CILT UK) within their Humanitarian Logistics Certification Programme. It can be completed within six months and students receive guidance from a professional logistician. Special emphasis is placed on preventing the introduction of counterfeit or substandard drugs to the supply chain.

"In many emergencies, I have noticed gaps in terms of handling the logistics needs of medical supplies," Fred Urlep, a logistician with WHO's Health Action in Crises Cluster, said, noting that during the Cyclone Nargis crisis in Myanmar in 2008, an air bridge was set up between Bangkok and Yangon to provide essential needs.

"Medical supplies from some NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and partners were transiting in Bangkok but no facilities were provided for specific drugs that required handling via a cold chain. Fortunately we intervened and helped establish a cold chain to avoid losses of medical supplies."

Key partners involved in the course are WHO, the UN World Food Programme (**WFP**), the UN Children's Fund (**UNICEF**), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières-Switzerland. Three global learning institutions helped develop the course - the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport-UK (United Kingdom), People Development Group and the Logistics Learning Alliance.

Funding for the course has been provided by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the European Community Humanitarian Aid Department (ECHO), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

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