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European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

Humanitarian Air Services

What is it?

Humanitarian air services provide a lifeline for millions of people caught in humanitarian crises. In such situations, ensuring fast and safe access to the affected areas is crucial in saving lives.

Planes and helicopters are often the only way to reach crisis-affected areas that have no reliable roads, ports or commercial airstrips, or that are rendered inaccessible by constraints. Humanitarian air services are used to transport humanitarian staff and aid and to carry out medical and security evacuations, as needed.

The EU operates its own humanitarian air service (EU Humanitarian Aid Flight), while also supporting other humanitarian air operations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU also supplemented its humanitarian air services with ad-hoc Humanitarian Air Bridge operations.

Why is this important?

Logistical challenges and poor infrastructure can hamper humanitarian operations. For instance, while transport restrictions were in place during the current COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian and COVID-19 medical supplies could not reach the countries in need.

Natural hazards such as floods can leave communities stranded and cut off road transport. Amidst a humanitarian crisis, it may be difficult to reach people in need located in remote areas.

Security considerations may also make it difficult for humanitarian aid workers to reach those in need. Overland transport can be fraught with risks in conflict-ridden areas, putting the safety of humanitarian workers at stake.

Humanitarian flights are additionally used for the evacuation of aid workers for medical reasons. They can also be used following security threats that require evacuating humanitarian workers.

Humanitarian organisations can use regular or charter flights for this purpose, but local airlines are not always reliable and safe, nor do they necessarily serve the locations where humanitarian assistance is needed. Efficiently managed, reliable and safe humanitarian air services are the best option to ensure that humanitarian workers can continue with their life-saving work.

How are we helping?

EU funding for humanitarian air services in 2020, including transport and logistics, amounts to €47.8 million to date.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the EU operates its own humanitarian air service fleet (EU Humanitarian Aid Flight) with hubs in Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mali. This service, with around €14.8 million in funding, is also used free of charge by humanitarian organisations that the EU works with.

In 2020, this service transported around 8,000 passengers and 200 tonnes of cargo to crisis-affected areas. The EU has added a helicopter in its EU Humanitarian Aid Flight fleet to facilitate humanitarian access to unsafe and hard-to-reach locations in the DRC.

The EU also provides financial assistance to other non-profit humanitarian air services. In 2020, the EU contributed €20 million to the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) operations in Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan and Yemen, and €500,000 to the Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) operations in Afghanistan. Besides, the EU finances ad-hoc flights to support humanitarian operations during emergencies.

The EU's Humanitarian Air Bridge operations were set up in May 2020 in response to the transport challenges created by the coronavirus pandemic, with the purpose to transport much-needed health and humanitarian material and staff to fragile countries. The budget incurred for these operations has reached around €8 million to date. In addition, the EU provided financial support, amounting to €4.5 million, to the United Nations Global Response.

In other contexts, ad-hoc flights are used to temporarily relocate humanitarian aid workers to a safer region within the same country if the security situation suddenly worsens at the place where they are operating. Furthermore, rapid medical evacuations can be organised for humanitarian workers to get them from their place of operation to main hospitals where they can be treated.

Facts & figures

In 2020, the EU's own humanitarian air service (EU Humanitarian Aid Flight) has a fleet of 4 aircraft:

- 2 in the DRC
- 1 in Kenya
- 1 in Mali

EU support to humanitarian air services in 2020:
more than **€47 million**, as follows:

- approximately **€14.8 million** for EU Humanitarian Aid Flight
- more than **€20 million** in funding to other non-profit humanitarian air services
- **€8 million** for EU Humanitarian Air Bridge
- **€4.5 million** to the United National Global Response air services