

An Opportunity to Serve Humanity

By Donna Hawkins, Forestry Technician

I recently responded to a detail at the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) in Washington, DC as the Operations Center Manager. I had acted in this capacity several years ago when the idea of an Operations Center was just coming to fruition. I reviewed the updated position description to prepare for my month's detail and was somewhat unsettled by my newly acquired responsibilities. I discovered that the position and the technology had evolved tremendously since their infancy. Upon arrival in DC in April of 2004, I did not know whether a disaster would develop that would result in activation of the Operations Center.

A bit of background information may be in order to explain how a U.S. Forest Service employee may work within OFDA. The Disaster Assistance Support Program (DASP) is a little known program within the USFS's International Programs division. DASP was formally established in 1985 by an interagency agreement between the US Agency for International Development and the Forest Service. By this time, the Forest Service had already established an outstanding reputation as an agency capable of responding to emergency wildfires in an efficient and effective manner. It was determined that the Incident Command System that had been developed for responding to wildfire could be applied to any type of disaster.

Currently, there are only seven fulltime DASP employees within the Forest Service. In order to be successful, the program relies heavily on USFS and BLM detailers to fulfill personnel requests by Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. I am fortunate enough to have received training to be a member of a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) and have responded to a variety of requests since 1995.

Upon arrival at the Ronald Reagan Building on a Monday morning in April, I was detained by security guards until my security clearance could be verified. Subsequently, I met with a full-time DASP employee to receive a briefing. The Operations Center was not currently active. This would allow me to become familiar with the new computer system and filing methods, the Response Management Team scheduling, the Duty Officer assignments, the meeting and planning room scheduling protocols, the location and operation of numerous safes, the operation of secure phone/fax, printers, phones, scanners, copiers and any other newly assigned responsibilities in support of OFDA's mission.

By Monday afternoon, we had learned that our

Disaster Assistance Support Program field representative had just returned from the Darfur region of Sudan and would be providing an informative account of the developing humanitarian crisis the following day. On Friday, the Response Management Team (RMT) "stood up" and the smaller of the two Operations Center was activated. Once activated, responsibility for decision-making and coordination concerning Darfur moved to the RMT, which also became the primary point of contact for DARTs and all resources in the field.

Throughout the remainder of my detail, the Darfur RMT was conducting their daily business from the Operations Center. It was my job to keep things running as smoothly as possible by performing such tasks as opening safes to provide access to classified documents, contacting computer personnel with computer problems, making contacts to replace broken furniture or sick employees. The job presented a variety of small challenges with accompanying protocols to follow.

The core members of any RMT consist of a Response Manager, a Deputy Manager for Response, a Deputy Manager for Coordination, a Press Officer, a Planning Coordinator, an Information Officer, a Logistics Coordinator, a Communications and Records Coordinator, and an Administrative Coordinator. There are numerous other positions that may be added depending on the complexity of the disaster. The Darfur team had fourteen members with a variety of duties. Initially, the focus was on getting a DART to the field.

The DART leader was already in Sudan and was making personnel and resource requests through the daily phone calls with the RMT. A major obstacle to the DART deployment was the government of Sudan. Every day the government would postpone the issuance of visas. When I returned to Montana three weeks later, the visas had not yet been secured. The RMT had many other jobs to keep them busy during this time period. The infrastructure of Darfur was evaluated to determine the options for food distribution. Appropriate food



Operations Center at the Office Of Foreign Disaster Assistance

availability and food location were pinpointed. Funding was confirmed. Security issues were identified. The Bush Administration was provided with daily updates. Grant proposals by humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations were reviewed.

In a month's time, I learned so much about Sudan, the largest country in Africa, and about the government of Sudan's treatment of the non-Arab Muslims. It is a fact that the government of Sudan is supporting the Jingaweit militia as they systematically attack towns and villages, looting, killing, and raping village residents while they burn their crops and houses. Colin Powell visited the region and said that the situation in Darfur is genocide.

The Darfur RMT is still active today, nine months later, and from what I hear on the news, the situation has not improved. Although I am now in Montana, I have not forgotten the important aid work being done by the American government for the displaced persons of Darfur. I am proud to have been a part of it.

