



Advanced communications support Defense in Pakistan flood relief

By **Bob Brewin** 08/24/10

The Defense Department has spent the past month providing help to the millions of flood victims in Pakistan, a mission that has required a massive deployment of mobile communications equipment to manage helicopter and cargo flights delivering supplies.

The monsoon-driven floods have left more than 20 million people homeless over an area of 100,000 square miles, a disaster that **surpasses** the combined devastation of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake and the January earthquake in Haiti.

In response, Defense deployed cargo aircraft to provide food and other supplies, which helicopters operated by the Army, Navy and Marines delivered to the provinces of **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa** and Punjab in northeast Pakistan.

The operation put added stress on the Pentagon and military services as they continue the war in Afghanistan and manage the pull out of the last combat units from Iraq.

C-130 cargo aircraft from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, including those flown by crews from the **182nd Airlift Wing of the Illinois Air National Guard**, flew packaged meals that conformed to Islamic dietary restrictions into Pakistan, which then were distributed by fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. Since late July, aircraft have evacuated 7,835 people and delivered more than 1.6 million pounds of relief supplies.

U.S. helicopters have operated from Ghazi Air Base, northeast of Islamabad, since late July, with the Army initially **managing the mission** with CH-47 Chinook helicopters and two UH-60 Blackhawk utility helicopters from the 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade.

Teams were in Pakistan in late July to provide communications support for the U.S. relief operations, said Marine Col. Stephen Corcoran, commander of the **Joint Communications Support Element** based at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida.

On Aug. 12, Marine and Navy helicopters from the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit **flew** from the amphibious assault ship USS *Peleliu* to Ghazi to relieve the 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade.

The Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 165 aboard the *Peleliu* dispatched a communications team to Ghazi in early August to help coordinate operations for Navy and Marine aircraft. Currently, four Marine CH-53E heavy-lift helicopters, 12 Marine CH-46E Sea Knight medium-lift helicopters and three MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopters from the Navy's Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron 15 in Norfolk, Va., are flying relief missions from Ghazi.

Lt. Jason Torres, a communications officer with the Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron from Miramar Air Station in San Diego, said his team used an AN/PRC-117 radio for initial communications. The radio can handle satellite-voice and low-data-rate communications as well as voice communications with helicopters over the military UHF airband.

Cpl. Joshua McCorkle, a data network specialist with the squadron, said he set up a broadband satellite system called the [Support Wide Area Network](#), which sends data at 3.5 megabits per second, or roughly half the speed of a residential Internet connection.

The Marines, the Joint Communications Support Element and the *Peleliu* are supported by a satellite transponder with a total throughput of 68 megabits per second, said Laura Williams, a spokeswoman for the Defense Information Systems Agency.

The SWAN system is packed into seven transit cases, and McCorkle said he can set it up in about 90 minutes. The system supports voice, data and video on both classified and unclassified Defense networks. Staff Sgt. Nick Martinez, the squadron's radio chief, said the UHF air-to-ground radios the Marines brought to Ghazi are essential for coordinating the helicopter operations, including passing on suggestions from a Pakistan Air Force pilot, who serves as the onboard safety officer on every flight.

Corcoran said he originally deployed six personnel to Ghazi with an Early Entry System, which provides the joint command at Ghazi with Internet access to tap in to secret and unclassified Defense networks using a small satellite dish about the size of a cookie sheet. He said the Joint Communications Support Element has installed two Early Entry Systems in Pakistan to provide voice, video and data service to as many as 250 people -- a large amount of end users for only a handful of technicians o support, he said.

The Joint Communications Support Element has two satellite kits and another four staffers on the ground who are ready to move out if requested by the Pakistan government.

Dan Feldman, a deputy special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the State Department, [told](#) a press briefing on Monday the operations in Ghazi "demonstrated to us the very, very close and joint coordination between the U.S. and Pakistani military."