



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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Interviewee: Colonel Qazi Ullah

Interviewer: David Paterson

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PATERSON: This is David Paterson and today is October 28th, I'm here as the guest of Colonel Ullah, he is with UNMIL (United Nations Mission In Liberia) and we are at their star base location and it is 10:30 in the morning. Just to be clear these are his own personal views and not necessarily UNMIL's. Thank you so much for meeting with us. It was a bit of a chaotic situation at the security gate.

ULLAH: *Yes, my apologies for the delay which was really out of control. To start with my name is Colonel Qazi Ullah and I am Deputy Chief Integrated Support Services in UNMIL and to be more specific in the Ebola crisis I was nominated by the Mission leadership as the logistic coordinator for UNMIL to fight the Ebola. I am here to highlight on my experience during that crisis.*

PATERSON: Wonderful. To begin we always like to hear a little bit about your overall career briefly. Would you be able to tell us a little bit about your current position and what it entails and also, your background previous to that and the roles that you played in the response to the outbreak?

ULLAH: *Yes, I am a military officer from Bangladesh and I was commissioned in 1988 in the corps of logistics and my logistics experience encompassed fields, headquarters and the school of instructions. To be more specific this is my fourth assignment with the United Nations. I worked in Sierra Leone and Liberia. I was here also when the mission started. In 2009-2011, I was military adviser in Senegal in the United Nations office for West Africa. Finally I was appointed as Deputy Chief ISS in UNMIL in January 2014.*

My specializations include supply chain management, operational logistics, crisis management, and that's all about me.

PATERSON: Those are exactly the types of skills that we are hoping to learn more about so that definitely covers the technical aspects we're interested in. So for non-experts would you briefly describe the key elements of the supply chain system used at UNMIL? Did it work? There were so many different partners involved - did it work to support the World Food Program's (WFP) logistic cluster? Did they have a parallel system or what did that entail?

ULLAH: *No, before I go forward we must make it clear that UNMIL has a standard logistic procedure and we have a clear supply chain within the mission. We don't have a problem with that. But this is more specific to the mission needs. But when the Ebola crisis came and the requirement was not mission specific, it was country-wide and it was something new for which none of us were prepared. So there was a big gap between the system in place and the actual need on the ground.*

Over the period we improved on that in cooperation with all the partners, UN agencies, especially led by the government and we could improve the situation.

PATERSON: So before the outbreak can you tell me a little bit more about how these systems were organized in Liberia? What was the usual practice?

ULLAH: *The usual practice is that the whole country is divided from the administrative point of view into eight sectors. These sectors headquarters are mainly located nearby or located with the county headquarters. We have logistic base headquarters, the place you are sitting now; this is called star base. We have central warehouses in terms of engineering, in terms of transport, in terms of general supply. The central warehouses are here. We support from here to all the sectors. The mode of support from this, we do it in combination of road, air, as well as sea. The normal routine works—the routine support is done through*

road. We have transport and when in certain periods, especially during the rainy system we have communication cut off in some of the areas due to the bad roads then we use helicopters.

PATERSON: And you have those.

ULLAH: We have helicopters and we have also a ship called MV Catarina. We mainly use it for bulk transportation especially in Harper and Greenville.

PATERSON: How many helicopters do you have?

ULLAH: We have eight helicopters.

PATERSON: So this is your central—just to be sure I understand, this is your central location, you have eight helicopters.

ULLAH: Central log base. In addition to that we have eight, we call it sectors. In the sectors also we have some logistic elements.

PATERSON: Warehouses?

ULLAH: Warehouses, but at the lower level, minimum level. It is only for the sector's needs.

PATERSON: That is an entirely different system than the WFP's?

ULLAH: Yes, definitely. That is a standalone UNMIL system.

PATERSON: So the way we like to structure the interview after the opening is we ask a couple of basic timeline questions to get an idea of how operations changed over time especially as that pertains to changes in the supply chain, so increases in equipment that you needed or changes in strategy.

ULLAH: Okay.

PATERSON: After that we go into a new section of basic logistics where we try to trace all the levels of the supply chain procurement to movement, transport, warehousing, managing inventory. After that we go into some checklists of more specific questions that come up from that section and then we like to close with some overarching conclusions. We'd like your own personal conclusions about the response.

So transitioning to the next section, would you remember back to the first few days of the outbreak and tell us how it began to change your job. How did you first hear the news of the outbreak?

ULLAH: You know we had it—we call it—outbreak in two different periods. What I can recollect the first outbreak was roughly in the month of February and March in the region. That was in the low profile. It was more of—nobody took it very seriously. It was—the numbers were limited and it was not that widespread. The second outbreak I think it was in the month of June, 2014. That was a big surprise because every day the cases were increasing all over the country. Suddenly the proportion was higher in terms of casualty and victims. So at that period there was a need of organizing or fighting the epidemic.

PATERSON: So the second one triggered off—.

ULLAH: *The second one triggered off the involvement of all the agencies. In the first one it was more the WHO (World Health Organization). They were the lead basically to monitor the disease.*

PATERSON: Got it. How did UNMIL operations change around that second outbreak? What was the change in operations?

ULLAH: *Of course, we had a major shift when the second outbreak happened because the priorities changed. Initially our main priority was mission specific but with the outbreak of the disease we had to accommodate the interest of the country where we are deployed. In some places we gave no priority to this [Indecipherable 00:09:51] and we scaled down our own operation and we maintained it to the minimal essential and we diverted all our resources all our assets in supporting this fight. So definitely our operations were affected. We scaled down to the essentials.*

PATERSON: Was that right away in June or July or August?

ULLAH: *It started in July.*

PATERSON: Could you walk me through a little bit about how those protocols changed? Did you change how you organized supplies or the frequency with which you moved the supplies?

ULLAH: *It was more of the mission support aspect, especially the support to the government as well as our international partners. So we were providing transport, we were providing forklifts, we were providing our helicopters, our ships, for all those things.*

PATERSON: So that was the main role.

ULLAH: *That was the main role.*

PATERSON: Did you deploy forklifts to the logistics hubs or to the airports?

ULLAH: *Yes, the logistics hub. We provided—we carried all the incoming cargo coming to RIA (Roberts International Airport), to the different warehouses in the country. It was our transport—we have a transport unit called China Transport Company and we provide them.*

PATERSON: For all the equipment coming in here by the seaports nearby?

ULLAH: *No, mainly we were focused on—during the initial crisis, as there was an emergency. Essentials were coming by air in cargo planes and we were moving them from RIA to here and from the port also we moved some of the cargo. When there were big deployments, we used our ship especially for Harper and Greenville.*

PATERSON: It was easier to use the ship than the roads?

ULLAH: Yes.

PATERSON: How much cargo can you ship?

ULLAH: *I can give you the figures. We shipped 5 million—I can give you the paper, just note this figure, 5,909,000.*

PATERSON: That's a lot.

ULLAH: *That's a lot.*

PATERSON: Would we be able to have a copy of that?

ULLAH: *No, I will talk with you. These are my personal notes. You will not understand because I write in very short form just to address your concerns.*

PATERSON: Then the forklifts, you redeployed all of those forklifts to the airport? The Roberts Airport?

ULLAH: *No, basically in the airport we were using the airport handling equipment but our forklift was involved in the stadium. You know there is a stadium, where the logistics hub was. We employed two forklifts with operators for more than four months.*

PATERSON: Went to the stadium.

ULLAH: Yes.

PATERSON: Did staffing systems change meaningfully over the time? Did UNMIL bring in additional staff or hire additional local workers?

ULLAH: *No. What we did, we did it from our internal staff. Maybe we reassigned them for this purpose.*

PATERSON: But there was no additional staff.

ULLAH: *No, we did not take additional staff.*

PATERSON: So we'll focus more on supplies than than any changes in personnel because we usually cover both.

ULLAH: *There was no change in the personnel. Personnel we redeployed, we reassigned from existing staff.*

PATERSON: Did you notice any clear variation in the success of your logistical systems in some particular counties or some areas that managed it better than others? Do you have any comments about that? Some places are more remote so it may—.

ULLAH: *Can you repeat the question?*

PATERSON: Just to make sure that I understand also what UNMIL did, you used some of your fleet in order to help transport supplies around.

ULLAH: Yes.

PATERSON: At that point were those cars under the control of UNMIL or—.

ULLAH: *We kept it under the control of UNMIL. Initially, before UNMIL came, subsequently there was a mission for fighting Ebola so UNMIL was the lead. We were coordinating with the help of WFP in some of the places we used WFP*

resources also in initial days. WFP had been a very valuable partner, I always appreciate their support during this crisis because I was coordinating, sitting in the Ministry of Health. I was not sitting here; I was deputy to the Minister of Health as a logistic coordinator. My office was there [Indecipherable 00:15:56] with the Ministry of Health. I was coordinating the initial logistic support on behalf of UNMIL as well as Ministry of Health.

PATERSON: When was this in the process? What month were you deployed there?

ULLAH: *The Ministry requested UNMIL to put a logistic person to help them in organizing the support.*

PATERSON: Was this early on though in June or July?

ULLAH: *It was in late June. UNMIL nominated me to go to the ministry and help the ministry in organizing. This is how from the beginning I got involved.*

PATERSON: So you were working with CHI (Clinton Health Initiative) and John Harris and those people?

ULLAH: *Yes, I was working with the Minister, the Deputy Minister, Mr. Linga, he was the assistant minister. Then Mr. Harris, the Chief Supply chain Management. All the partners who were there included WFP, UNICEF, MSF (Medicins San Frontieres). The WHO and MSF were on the disease control side. WHO. All the partners were working.*

PATERSON: Were UNMIL—was the staff of vehicles operating in all of the counties in Liberia, across the whole country?

ULLAH: *No. What we did, we donated fifty vehicles to the government right at the request. This is an important aspect; we donated fifty vehicles to the Ministry—to the government—to fight the Ebola, EVD (Ebola Virus Disease). We tried to fulfill their transport demand, we did not specifically employ transport from here to the counties.*

PATERSON: Okay.

ULLAH: *We used it where needed, we used helicopters mainly. In addition to that we employed our Engineering Unit for developing some of the ETUs, Ebola Treatment Unit, to develop the ground and access road. So that was also an important part of the support.*

PATERSON: Maybe let's talk a little more about that. Was that something you did right away developing those ETUs, supporting their development?

ULLAH: Yes.

PATERSON: Was that in June and July as well?

ULLAH: *Yes, we supported in establishing the ETUs.*

PATERSON: How was that strategized? Did some partners communicate to you that that was what was needed?

ULLAH: *It was two ways. You know when the ETUs started coming up, the partners were given responsibility to run the ETUs, maybe you know that. So when the partners*

identified a place for ETU and defined that this is full of vegetation and the roads are not accessible, so finding no other alternative they approached UNMIL and if we were nearby, we helped the partners in clearing the ground, in improving the access to the site as well as developing the road.

PATERSON: Was that a relatively straightforward process or were there any unexpected obstacles that came up when trying to do that?

ULLAH: *Obstacles? I don't say obstacles but there were limitations because we had limited engineering resources. The demands were ever increasing. We had to adjust our priorities based on our location and the distance.*

PATERSON: How long would it take more or less just out of curiosity to develop the ground, the site for an ETU, for an engineering team?

ULLAH: *It all depends on the nature of the ground—.*

PATERSON: And how far it is—.

ULLAH: *How far it is from the main artery, what is the condition of the road in the surrounding area. What is the nature and level of vegetation? It all depends on that.*

PATERSON: Okay.

ULLAH: *It is very difficult to specifically say number of days. It is different based on the nature of the ground.*

PATERSON: I understand. Those fifty vehicles that you mentioned that were donated to the MOH (Ministry Of Health), was this early on before the logistics cluster had fully implemented?

ULLAH: Yes.

PATERSON: I see. Then once the logistics cluster was implemented were those vehicles moved into that organization or structure?

ULLAH: *What I know about these vehicles is that we gave it to the government and the government then subdivided it among different government agencies and especially the counties where the EVD was increasing.*

PATERSON: Okay.

ULLAH: *We did not interfere in the distribution from the government side. We handed it over to the government—what they saw useful or what they considered useful, they did it.*

PATERSON: These vehicles which were sent to the Ministry, were they existing within your fleet here in the country or did you have to procure them or bring additional ones in?

ULLAH: *These were vehicles that were in the country. We have standard set procedure through which we can gift it to the government in this type of situation. We followed that. These were in our fleet.*

PATERSON: Did UNMIL procure any supplies at all through the course of the outbreak or would you say it was all redeployment of existing supplies?

ULLAH: *We procured a lot of supplies. We procured body bags, we procured PPEs, Personal Protective Equipment, and we gave these things to the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) because they were responsible for disposal of bodies in the initial days and there were no body bags. These were all UNMIL body bags. We again demanded for this purpose. We gave almost more than 500 body bags.*

PATERSON: Did you have these already stockpiled or did you have pre-existing—?

ULLAH: *The body bags as part of the mission is stockpiled. We have them because God forbid something happens in the mission so these we have. We finished that. None of the agencies had body bags, it was only UNMIL. The ICRC had also a limited supply, they initially did. Later on we had big supplies coming but initially it was the UNMIL body bags.*

PATERSON: Then when you procured—you procured additional body bags, right?

ULLAH: Yes.

PATERSON: Did you have preexisting relationships with vendors in order to do that?

ULLAH: *Definitely in the UN procurement system we have a framework contract for things issued. So we had the existing contract and we utilized that.*

PATERSON: That has all the things like quality standards—?

ULLAH: *Of course, we have very strict quality procedures.*

PATERSON: Did that procedure change at all over time because you had procured a huge number of bags, was there a way to streamline it or make it easier?

ULLAH: *No, what we did is we requested of our counterpart in New York to reduce the lead time—in the normal range something takes three months and during the Ebola crisis we requested to make it within 30 days or 45 days. This is how we tried to speed up the process.*

PATERSON: So we're really interested in those types of processes, the things that—.

ULLAH: *That speeded up the process.*

PATERSON: How was that implemented or how was that strategized?

ULLAH: *When the crisis came up and the sudden upsurge and its epidemic nature, this was known all over the world. Different stakeholders, maybe my headquarters, my vendors, everybody was in the picture that this is a real emergency and people were really cooperative. So we were speeding up the process and we got cooperation from everybody. People understand that this is an emergency. Some of the times, what we did, the things we used to bring through the ship which would take maybe 30 days, we brought it by air, air cargo. That came in four days. So this is how, depending on the need of the specific item, we sped up the process.*

PATERSON: We are especially interested in different management structures or organizational techniques to speed up those processes. You mentioned that people were rallying together because they could see it was an emergency, there was local coordination.

ULLAH: Yes.

PATERSON: Was there any policy or program that UNMIL has for United Nations agencies to streamline these things, to speed up procurement when an emergency is happening and they need to get it to the country?

ULLAH: *No. The problem is that we don't—in practice, every agency has their own procurement procedures.*

PATERSON: I'm learning that.

ULLAH: *So within those procedures the different agencies when they were assigned to provide certain items, they were managing from their point of view. There was no central procurement umbrella.*

PATERSON: Were there any difficulties in bringing supplies into the country, either difficulties in the ports, getting in through the ports, clearing planes for landing, that sort of thing? Or ships for docking?

ULLAH: *No, I don't see difficulty there but yes there were some problems in communication. If the preferred communication method or the preferred chain of communication was not followed so the respective agencies maybe did not know what was coming and when it was coming and suddenly they arrived here. There were number of issues that things, when they started coming and there was a very short window of communication and that created problems in discharging goods from the airport or the ships and all those things. When there was proper communication then there was no problem.*

PATERSON: Maybe tell me a bit more about how that was smoothed out. What were the factors do you think—.

ULLAH: *What we used to do, we used to have a regular meeting in the ministry and we had one focal point. So we requested all the agencies that—because you know the things were coming. Different agencies were bringing different goods. So we told them that whenever they want to bring anything they must inform this focal point who was from the government about what is coming, when it is coming and they would inform. Because it is not only that things are coming, the problem was that you have to transport them, you have to warehouse them and further you have to distribute them. So if the communication is not done properly the whole chain gets a problem. Another problem is that we have very limited space in the airport. If things get stuck up there other aircraft cannot land and discharge their cargo.*

PATERSON: I'd like to hear more about that but first you mentioned there was a focal point at the ministry. Do you mean an office or a particular person where all of the things had to be reported to?

ULLAH: *There was a particular person. So all the agencies would inform him and maybe he would inform his counterpart with customs clearance and all those things.*

PATERSON: And this was in June or July as well or after?

ULLAH: *Right after July.*

PATERSON: This was pre-[Indecipherable 00:29:35] Management system and that would have taken over that sort of thing right?

ULLAH: *Yes. It improved over the period.*

PATERSON: Why do you think it improved? People just got better?

ULLAH: *People get used to it. Initially you know in what is my feeling, in such emergency, it is not the shortage of goods. Goods will start pouring in very soon; it is the management of the goods. That is the biggest—I think teaching, learning whatever you said, we always had some preconceived idea that there is some emergency you don't have goods. In fact not. Now the response time—at one stage we were getting so many things and we were finding it really difficult to work, to accommodate and how to distribute.*

PATERSON: Right, different languages on the labels—.

ULLAH: *Another aspect that is very important. There are two aspects from a logistic point of view that are very important. One is not the shortage, it is the management and distribution. The second is getting the right thing. It is very much important. For that reason initially we were finding problems that we were getting goods and medicine which is not urgently needed for Ebola but that was taking up all the space in the warehouses and everything.*

PATERSON: Why do you think people were sending that?

ULLAH: *Initially there was a lack of coordination. People started sending without consulting what was needed on the ground. We improved it later but it took some time. In the meantime all these things came. You cannot just throw it away because this is all from taxpayers' money and these are all expensive items. Finally what we did, with the help of WHO and MSF and Ministry of Health as the lead we called it—in the album you have top ten, top twenty, top thirty, the song chart—we made a list, the top thirty. We tried to impress on all the governments and donors that these are the priorities; we need these things. We need more PPE, we need more chlorine and we need more body bags.*

Then the routine medical stuff. This was the biggest challenge from my aspect. You were getting things. People were sending you—yes all the things are needed but you cannot manage everything when you don't have space. You must understand here also the weather. We have a very long, long, rainy season here so you can't make any temporary storage facility. The rain comes and everything gets spoiled.

PATERSON: Right.

ULLAH: *That was also a very important lesson. How do you manage your incoming goods?*

PATERSON: So after you implemented this top thirty list of priority items did that noticeably smooth out the—?

ULLAH: *Yes, it improved. I had a discussion with the minister and he was also very optimistic about it. He personally instructed me that if someone contacted us as*

we were all working in the Ministry of Health before, if they were sending anything they should get it cleared from the Ministry of Health. So that came in place but it was a later date. By this time we had already accumulated a lot of unnecessary goods but finally we improved. There was an instruction that nothing should come—before you send anything you send a list. We will verify; we will validate it. We will give clearance and then you send it.

PATERSON: But that was later.

ULLAH: *Yes, that was later. Initially things just started coming in and we were in deep trouble.*

PATERSON: This clearing list that you developed later, do you remember more or less when that was, what month?

ULLAH: *Yes, right at the beginning, it was at the first week of July.*

PATERSON: Oh, the first week of July. But it was before that that you were using the top thirty list?

ULLAH: *No, no, before that there was no specific list because we had to develop—let me check in my computer if I can give you the list.*

PATERSON: That would be great.

ULLAH: *This we learned the hard way that we needed this list. We found that things were coming that we don't need and what we need that is not coming. Just as an example, examination gloves, face masks, surgical gloves, shoe covers, protective gown, PPE, hand soap, disinfectant, chlorine—.*

PATERSON: These were your priorities.

ULLAH: *And body bags—these types of things.*

PATERSON: So to get a sense of when those two systems—when the clearing list at the MOH replaced the top 30 list, the top 30 list you said happened right away like early July.

ULLAH: *Yes, but to get the result out of it, to get it implemented because by this time already the donors, the different agencies, they were planning—in the initial time there was no central coordination. It took time. So the donors or the agencies they were more making stand alone decisions. They were doing and whatever they think is necessary they were sending. Some of the items—I'll give you some examples. We got buckets, different types of plastic buckets. Buckets were necessary, but we got more than we needed—.*

PATERSON: Sure.

ULLAH: *But we didn't need so many buckets. But that took over a lot of space. Then we got a lot of medical goods, medicines which were not needed or not essential for Ebola fighting. So all those things. Finally we overcame it but it took time. It was not very early.*

PATERSON: Then once the Ministry of Health started preclearing items which replaced the list system, was that right after? Was that in the fall that that happened? When did that system come?

ULLAH: *This was a continuous process that we were doing. As the disease graph was going up, and the requirements—we came to know that what are the things that are needed that were essential and we were just focusing on that.*

PATERSON: So it was more a gradual transition.

ULLAH: *It was a gradual transition.*

PATERSON: What happened to all the things that were coming in that were useful but not useful for EVD?

ULLAH: *That is a good question. What we did is in consultation with the ministry — definitely the Ministry was the lead—the decision was that the National Drug Service would take over these things and through their normal medical management or medical administration of the health system in the country they will distribute it among all the counties.*

PATERSON: Through the NDS?

ULLAH: *Through the National Drug System.*

PATERSON: It is good to hear that they were useful.

ULLAH: *Yes, through NDS.*

PATERSON: You said before the biggest issues were not a shortage of supplies but management and distribution of those supplies and getting the right things of course.

ULLAH: *Yes.*

PATERSON: So going back to that first major thing, management and distribution—and I completely agree with you—that is what we're interested in the management and distribution issues. Are there any other big things that come to mind, management and distribution issues that were really, really challenging to overcome that you oversaw?

ULLAH: *Yes, the management and distribution of things—we had a number of challenges.*

PATERSON: I'd like to hear a couple of them.

ULLAH: *Number one was that we didn't have proper storage places. We had problems with storing these things. This challenge came up immediately. The airport didn't have place, the port—finally we got one warehouse in the port, but the problem in the port warehouse was that the port has their standard security procedure entry. So that was a big limitation for bringing goods in and bringing out goods.*

Finally then I personally moved around the city with the minister to find out and recommended that maybe that we use some of the schools, the auditoriums because the schools were closed, as a warehouse because it has to be a government building or something. Finally we tried to improve by using big rub halls, the big tents, with the help of the WFP.

PATERSON: That came later.

ULLAH: *You must have seen at the Ministry of Health. I think the WFP—it still exists there.*

PATERSON: I actually went into—

ULLAH: *That was the first one. In the ministry, on the first floor there, there was a big auditorium which was due to some fire accident was not used. We also started using it to store. It was my idea. I find out that National Election Commission, they have a big warehouse and they have warehouses in the counties also. These are under government control.*

I talked to the Minister and to the customs people and we started using the election commission warehouse. That helped us a lot. So this is how we managed the initial things. Finally when Main Log Hub SKD came up with a lot of space we didn't have that problem. But initially it was a big challenge.

PATERSON: How did you find these National Election Commission warehouses? How did you—

ULLAH: *You know UNMIL has been helping in all the earlier elections. So we had an idea of what the resources the Election Commission had. Suddenly this struck my mind when I was moving around the city and not finding anything suddenly I thought I had one option. I contacted the commissioner of the Election Commission and I contacted the Ministry of Health, the Minister himself. I talked to the higher-ups in the government.*

PATERSON: Was he cooperative when he got it?

ULLAH: *And they agreed to release those for this purpose. This is how we managed it initially.*

PATERSON: That's great. So that essentially resolved the warehousing issue until the stadium became available.

ULLAH: *Temporarily until the stadium came up. The second policy that we used to distribute when we find it is very difficult to warehouse. We started in some of the cases where we know what are the things inside we started distributing from the airport to the different counties. So you don't have to warehouse in Monrovia. So that also helped us.*

PATERSON: You mentioned also that you had a warehouse in the port but it was difficult to get things through security?

ULLAH: *Yes it was difficult because the port has to follow its procedures. This is the international procedure.*

PATERSON: I've actually gone through it.

ULLAH: *You can't just go and come at any time.*

PATERSON: Was that warehouse --

ULLAH: *In fact we were not very comfortable in using the port warehouse due to this—. All things have to be done manually. I have forty or fifty laborers working in the warehouse with the help of GSA and all these things. Now all this entry control,*

access control, badging, recognition, going through all these checks, it stops your work.

PATERSON: Was that warehouse before you commandeered the National Election Commission warehouses?

ULLAH: *Yes, before we commandeered the National Election ones.*

PATERSON: So you tried to find other strategy.

ULLAH: *Yes it was more that came to my mind, I would say it was more of my innovation, the using of the National Election Warehouse.*

PATERSON: After that you stopped using the warehouse in the port or you just used it—?

ULLAH: *No we used that. What we used—we did not use it for distribution. When the things came for temporary storage. We use it. It was a good one, it had a lot of space. Some of the items take up a lot of space. For example, the chlorine, it comes in 10 and 20 liters, a barrel and drum. It was coming in bulk. Chlorine was in our top 30 list. It would take away all your space.*

PATERSON: You mentioned earlier on that there was limited space in the airport. Did you notice any ways of overcoming that bottleneck or was that a different organization that did that?

ULLAH: *You know the problem? We had serious problem at the airport especially you know Roberts Airport is a small airport and it has limited capacity. The warehouse capacity is also very limited. It is not designed to hold—every day—there was a time there were four or five cargo planes were coming and after discharging goods from the plane we didn't have any place to keep it. The problem is if you put it on the tarmac, if you keep things on the tarmac waiting for it to dislodge, the other planes, they are on the way and they cannot land.*

So often the air manager will call me and say, you have to pay compensation if that plane cannot land. So that was another issue.

PATERSON: Plus the rain could damage—.

ULLAH: *Most of the time I would get a call at 4:30 in the morning or late at night; all these issues coming up. So that was there.*

PATERSON: So how did you deal with that challenge? You just worked around the clock whenever it was needed?

ULLAH: *What we did, we tried, WFP as I said before was a great help to us. With the help of WFP and UNMIL transport we devised a strategy that we don't have to—we don't keep anything at the airport. The moment a plane landed, we would unload the plane and put it all in the same truck. It will be from plane to the truck.*

PATERSON: Directly?

ULLAH: *Discharge the cargo and we will try to get it out from there.*

PATERSON: And then they would move it to—.

ULLAH: *But after as I said to you, when stadium came in the picture, all these problems, we got rid of it.*

PATERSON: Can you think of any other management and distribution problems that were overcome creatively or innovatively?

ULLAH: *Yes, you know, in the Ministry of Health their existing system was vendor-based. They didn't have their own supply chain. For the county hospitals they had a contract system and the vendors supply that thing to the particular county and clinic. So when this Ebola crisis came up as there was no existing system, it was vendor-based, so the vendor cannot take over the Ebola responsibility. So we have to start this process that from the Ministry of Health they will contact the particular county informing them, look, I am sending you three drugs. The county health officer will come and receive that. So these are the new processes that came up.*

PATERSON: I'm not familiar with a vendor-based system; would you be able to describe it?

ULLAH: *A vendor-based system is very simple. It is the vendor response. For example, the government makes a contract that it has 15 counties so whatever they do, in all the counties the person will supply the goods to the counties, to the county health offices, so it is a vendor responsibility.*

PATERSON: So they have to track?

ULLAH: *That was the system in place. But when Ebola started there was the vendor system and the vendor cannot take care of the Ebola thing. The second point that came up was very important that you know for certain type of medicine and vaccines it has to be at a certain temperature from the point of origin to the point of consumption and we didn't have any cold chain in place. So that was a big limitation in some of the medical goods.*

PATERSON: But not for—

ULLAH: *What?*

PATERSON: Do any goods for Ebola have to be within a cold chain?

ULLAH: *Some of the things, exactly I can't remember because this is a pure medical issues, but some of the things and we were in trouble for that. Finally what we do, NDS said they have one cold storage facility near JFK. We utilized that.*

PATERSON: So that was normally used for typical NDS stuff or?

ULLAH: *Typical cold chain is required for injections of some medicines.*

PATERSON: And that was commandeered for Ebola supplies that had to remain cold?

ULLAH: *Yes.*

PATERSON: Interesting. Great, that's really useful. Any other management or coordination issues that you recall?

ULLAH: *Yes.*

PATERSON: These are actually like our key things, so.

ULLAH: *We had some issues with the—we in the international community, even the government, nobody was earlier prepared that the Ebola will take such an epidemic form. It was more of a surprise, the nature of its vastness in terms of what we said, the damage and all those things. But the problem—another problem was you have to understand that most of the things we do here, especially your loading, unloading, transportation and all these things, especially loading and unloading part of it, it is done with manual labor. Other than a few places where you use forklift or airport handling equipment, you have to do it.*

Now when the question of this labor comes who is going to pay for this labor? These are all additional costs. It is not budgeted anywhere.

PATERSON: Yes. Because the Ebola—.

ULLAH: *So when you use them how are you going to pay them? Definitely these things need some administrative procedure to develop. So that also creates sometimes some problems because you will not get laborers in time because they will come and claim they were not paid the last time so they will not come. So there you will struggle. Or your drivers will say, "I am here" but nobody is there to unload it and it is 2 o'clock at night or something like that.*

PATERSON: Do you happen to know or can you recommend any contacts or offices that dealt with facilitating the payment of exactly that staff who had to be paid in increased quantities?

ULLAH: *It was the Assistant Minister for Administration, Mr. Linga in the Ministry of Health. He was responsible for all those things.*

PATERSON: Do you happen to have his contact information?

ULLAH: *I think I will have his number.*

PATERSON: I'll make a note and we can discuss that after the interview.

ULLAH: *No problem, I'll give you the information.*

PATERSON: Moving on, does UNMIL have past experience in moving supplies in a crisis?

ULLAH: *Not like Ebola but we had past experience in the government, especially—you know we were helping the government in the election and in the election there are places where people, we dropped with helicopters the ballot boxes, the papers and people have to go by boat or walking to the different places and when the election is over again we bring the ballot boxes and all those things. So we have been doing all those things since the mission started.*

PATERSON: What about managing inventory in some of the systems that were set up, for example, in the—.

ULLAH: *Oh yes, initially there were some NGOs (nongovernment organizations) working with the Ministry of Health, one NGO I remember they were very active in helping us.*

PATERSON: Lauren Zinner or CHI.

ULLAH: *Lauren. Do you know her?*

PATERSON: I did speak with her.

ULLAH: *I appreciate her because she was very focused from the day and she was helping us and she was maintaining—she maintained the inventory until the crisis. Did you meet her?*

PATERSON: Yes.

ULLAH: *She is still there? I think it is the Clinton Health Initiative. They were very helpful.*

PATERSON: Great.

ULLAH: *Basically she was the lady maintaining the inventory.*

PATERSON: Interesting to see how all the different partners contributed parts of the puzzle.

ULLAH: *Yes, it was more teamwork. I must say though we had initially—we took time to organize but finally when we settled, the coordination improved and things got results. You will see that Liberia was the first country to be declared free. Still we have cases in Guinea and Sierra Leone.*

PATERSON: Yes, it was a good system. It is also very appealing for me as a researcher now towards the end of my trip to say, oh I've spoken to that person and I can put all the pieces together. It was very complicated.

ULLAH: *It was very complicated. For all of us it was a lesson because none of us fought cases like Ebola. It was initially—there was a lot of lack of knowledge. What is Ebola? How does it spread? There were a lot of misconceptions, apprehension and all those things. Over the period it improved but initially it was really fearful. I'll give my personal example. Everyone knows that I am working in the Ministry of Health. Some of the colleagues when I sit at a table they would try to keep a distance from me because they know I am working in the Ministry of Health and I am meeting all types of people with disease and no one knows. They would always keep a distance from me even when sitting in the dining hall for our lunch or something. I would just smile. I don't blame them. It is just the lighter part—when you are not sure what causes Ebola that creates a lot of—.*

PATERSON: Yes, but at the beginning it was—nobody knew how—?

ULLAH: *Everybody was scared.*

PATERSON: In our case studies we normally have a section on unexpected challenges. Of course there are many, many challenges in warehousing and moving supplies around but were there any completely unexpected things that came up that you could not have predicted and just blind-sided your operations?

ULLAH: *Just I think—I'll give you one example that will fall in that unexpected category. We had the biggest challenge with the burial especially at not my level at the government level. You know the burial in West Africa is a traditional affair. People are very emotional, sentimental about the burial aspect. They honored their dead in a befitting manner to say the final farewell. Now when the Ebola started and we had a lot of people dying on the street, dying in different places it was a big challenge for everyone, especially for ICRC and the government.*

Initially UNMIL was told to assist with the bulldozer and excavator to prepare the places for burial ground. I can remember, it was just in the initial days. My mission leadership agreed to help the government because at that moment the government didn't have this type of equipment readily available.

PATERSON: You mean in Monrovia?

ULLAH: *No here, especially in Monrovia. It is the place in Marshallville, there is a place, if you go towards Kakata and what happened as UNMIL agreed but the problem arose, the operator refused to go. I tell you there was a lot of fear and everything. So my operator he was afraid to go to the place where they will prepare the burial ground because he is afraid that he may be attacked by disease.*

PATERSON: Is he the only one who could run that?

ULLAH: *He is an operator, he is specialized. So what I do is—I told you, I come from military, we lead by example. So I told him, "Don't worry, I am going with you." So I went with him and I took Mr. Peter from ICRC. We both of us, Mr. Peter from ICRC—we both went to the place.*

PATERSON: And then he felt more comfortable?

ULLAH: *It is a very interesting story. We went to that place with my excavator. When we went to the area we found there is a big angry crowd and they surrounded us.*

PATERSON: Wow.

ULLAH: *They were very hostile. The problem was that in that area there was a burial last night and it was what I call—it was dark and it was raining so the people who were involved in burying the dead they could not maintain all the procedures. What happened is that there was a heavy rain and the body started floating. I have pictures with me, I can show you. I think it is in my computer. The people were very agitated. They were afraid number one that as these bodies are in their area all of them may be infected. The second concern was they don't want any new burial place in their area. That is why they were agitated and at one stage it appeared to me that some section of the crowd was so hostile that they may burn our vehicle or the excavator. So I was a bit apprehensive.*

What I did, I have to make a story because when you have an angry crowd and you are alone, there are only these three persons, you have to do it. I told them, "Look, I have come from the international agencies to investigate what went wrong in the last burial. I have come here to do an investigation and make sure that nobody comes and buries in this area." This is how I calmed them down.

In the meantime what I did is I kept my excavator a bit far and I told my operator over the telephone, you just leave the place right now. The crowd was so angry it was quite apprehensive that they might start burning the things. This is how I picked up a few team leaders from them who were leading the agitation. I talked to them. I got their confidence. I instilled a trust that I am the right person. I told them this. We fully sympathize with your concern. None should have done it; it was done very badly. That is why I have come to investigate it and to make sure that it will never happen in your area. I'm telling them all these things. I had to extricate. I tell my mission leadership, I advised, here these people's sensitivity is involved. If they do not like something in the area and the UN marked equipment there that gives a feeling that the UN is against the will of the people. That is not our job. We should be very careful about that. So I advised my mission

leadership that especially in burial places where people's sensitivities are involved, we should not get involved. That gives a message that UNMIL or the UN agencies are not sensitive to the people's sentiment.

PATERSON: Right, [inaudible].

ULLAH: *As you said unexpected something happened. I think that was a real crisis and now when I look back because I was in the midst of that angry and hostile crowd. How did I come out? I still recall it. All of my colleagues, they all, they were highly annoyed with me. Why did you go there? Who told you to? You should not have gone to the burial place because burial place is a place for contamination; it is a very risky place. All of them told me don't take your own initiative.*

When I came back I discarded all my clothes, all my shoes, everything. I had to discard everything.

PATERSON: That must have been really scary.

ULLAH: *I went near the bodies; I went to see the floating bodies and take pictures.*

PATERSON: Were you able to use the excavator there in the end?

ULLAH: *No, we could not use the excavator. Maybe it is in my personal computer; I will try to send it to you.*

PATERSON: Was the excavator—after that point—

ULLAH: *No, we never used it.*

PATERSON: Because it was determined it was against the will of the people?

ULLAH: *With this experience we didn't use the excavator any more.*

PATERSON: I can see that was a scary experience.

ULLAH: *There was a situation where we had to start burning the bodies. Did you know that?*

PATERSON: I have heard of that happening.

ULLAH: *Especially that was a big cultural shock for the community because they never imagined it—but they were angered, because there is no other option. No one wants to allow burial to take place in their area.*

PATERSON: Especially in Monrovia right?

ULLAH: *I can tell you another concern of the local people why they were agitated. They said that their water source is underground and with this flooding of rain with the Ebola bodies they are afraid that their water source might be contaminated. If the water is contaminated the whole village will be wiped out. So they were legitimate concerns.*

PATERSON: Anybody would be concerned by that. I wouldn't want that either. I can understand.

- ULLAH: I had to be—still when I look back when I extricated from there with that hostile crowd—and you know, when people are hostile common sense doesn't prevail. Any Tom, Dick, Harry can do anything.*
- PATERSON: And the crowd senses—.
- ULLAH: They were very angry. I have to just make up a story. I didn't lie. We really improved the situation and later on we managed it in a different way.*
- PATERSON: So how do you think—did UNMIL subsequent to that event enact any procedure to try to build trust with the community? Did they try to improve that situation?
- ULLAH: UNMIL was not directly involved with the burial but somehow or other we got entangled with the help of the excavator around those things. Burial was a pure ICRC issue, we were not involved. We maintained—we did not send our excavator or bulldozer for that purpose. We maintained that.*
- PATERSON: Did UNMIL have any role in supplying food to quarantined households, moving food around?
- ULLAH: Food, no. It was WFP had their own food distribution system.*
- PATERSON: They were the experts.
- ULLAH: They were doing that.*
- PATERSON: That's great, that was the technical part of the interview and you gave us some great details, thank you so much for that. I'm conscious of your time so to just move on to the stepping back section I'd like to invite you to reflect a little bit about the overall process. In thinking about the overall logistical response that you saw, the whole thing that you oversaw throughout the outbreak, are there any examples of policies or practices that really jumped to your mind as having been really, really successful or useful. I know we kind of addressed some of this before but if anything jumps to your mind that you may have forgotten maybe you can share that with us—as it pertains to logistics.
- ULLAH: No, logistics, what I understand is—I don't say—one big challenge we had especially on policies and procedures, I can give you one specific example. It is air travel. You know air travel is not like that—you tell your driver come with a vehicle and you start moving. You have to plan your fleet management, whatever aircraft is available, your crew list, your normal operational duties, your additional duties and everything.*
- So we have a standard procedure that for any travel request it should be 72 hours for passenger and any special flights 48 hours.;*
- PATERSON: Was this for helicopter flights?
- ULLAH: If you want to travel in a helicopter. This is now the SOP (standard operating procedure). This is an approved procedure from UN headquarters. Now I don't have any authority to wave it off because God forbid if there is an accident and an air crash today the auditors and the investigator will find out all the things. This is not followed, this is not followed, who gave this permission. So this was one of our biggest limitations.*

This is the place where we had initial misunderstanding with the partners also because suddenly they come up at the last moment and tell me, hey, I need a helicopter. At 10 o'clock they will say they need a helicopter at 1 o'clock to go from here to there. Now, what I find is that it is not the suddenness of the emergency nature—emergency is always emergency. We always say that if it is an emergency, no time limit, it will be done.

But some of the partners had poor planning. If it is the result of your poor planning that you did not foresee what you will do when, that doesn't allow me to give this waiver. Everything cannot be an emergency. Emergency can be once a week or once in 15 days but everyday cannot be that. This was the real hitch on it especially the air assets were with us. No one had air assets.. This was the only area where we had real problem to make people understand that this is good for all of us. If something happens who will take responsibility and people will try to blame us.

PATERSON: Right.

ULLAH: *So what we did—initially the partners were a bit hesitant. They were saying this is an emergency and you have to do this, this and these things. It took time, I don't say—it took real time to make them understand that it is more from the planning aspect. If you plan your work properly there is no problem, it can be done. It is the result of bad planning and poor planning.*

PATERSON: On the partners' side.

ULLAH: *On the partners' side. So it took time and we made some small changes like from 72 hours we brought it to 48 hours.*

PATERSON: How did you do that?

ULLAH: *We made amendment in the SOP for Ebola.*

PATERSON: Was that at HQ or here?

ULLAH: *We got approval from HQ for this. We shortened the timeline for this aviation policy, especially I can tell you we shortened from 72 to 48 hours for usual travel and for special flights, requests 48 hours to 24 hours.*

PATERSON: For individuals?

ULLAH: *Special flight, if you need a special flight.*

PATERSON: What is a special flight?

ULLAH: *A special flight means that for example suddenly something happened in Harper, you want to send a ten-person medical team, you need a special request for that. Finally we arranged one stand-by helicopter. If there is a real emergency and you need that, it will be able to fly in three hours. We arranged that.*

PATERSON: Was that used often?

ULLAH: No.

PATERSON: That's a great idea.

ULLAH: *That was not used very often but we kept that provision, one or two times it flew. But the problem—this was—I don't blame anybody, it was more perception because if you do not operate the aircraft you do not know all these details, what you have to do so you don't know. They were thinking in that aspect. Hey, I am working on Ebola, why shouldn't I get what I want at my time. But here, as I say to you, unless I get a waiver from my headquarters, I cannot compromise on this. Above all, you have to remember I have a mission here. I have more than 4000 people working, all the troops and military scattered all over the country. My fleet is designed to support them. I am bringing this additional work. So I had to make a lot of adjustments. This was the area which was a big challenge for us to improve.*

PATERSON: It sounds like you made compromises though.

ULLAH: *We managed to—what we did, we earmarked two helicopters for Ebola, for Ebola support. We arranged that this is being used. In addition to that the Swiss government sent two helicopters, two Pumas. When these two Pumas came—they don't have all those restrictions and all those things so that also helped us especially in meeting emergencies.*

PATERSON: Do you know who the main people were who used the two Ebola helicopters that you provided were? Was it just any partner that needed it or was it a particular set of people?

ULLAH: *Who the main people were—our—we supported basically the total national Ebola effort. The government was the lead.*

PATERSON: I was just curious as to which partner used it the most or was it anybody who needed it.

ULLAH: *Every partner had their specific job like WFP, UNICEF, they had their specific job. They were doing that. But during the Ebola it was more Ebola-centric.*

PATERSON: I have somewhere in my notes a man named Greg O'Callahan who was the Right Flight request logistician. Was he the one—I think he was with WFP. Was he the one who would have requested your helicopters? I'm just trying to put the pieces together. Does that make sense to you?

ULLAH: *No, what we did—when UNMIL started we formed the logistic cluster. It was partnered by WFP and UNMIL. So what we did, we were all sitting in the same office in the National Ebola Center. Did you see that?*

PATERSON: Yes.

ULLAH: *There used to be a National Ebola Center. So we would sit across the table. We introduced the mechanism which forms and everything that whoever needs anything it has to go through the logistic cluster. They will request from us. When the request comes we will see the priority and we will decide how these things will be moved. So this is how we improved. So whatever we were doing, basically within Monrovia all the transportation needs were done by UNMIL.*

PATERSON: Within Monrovia?

ULLAH: *Within Monrovia.*

PATERSON: All the transportation needs?

ULLAH: *Mainly.*

PATERSON: The WFP?

ULLAH: *No. WFP we were using mostly out of Monrovia because they had their framework transport contract, it was easier for them. We used to take help of our transport company within Monrovia especially things moving from RIA, from airport to different warehouse. For bulk as I said we were using our ship, MV Catarina.*

PATERSON: That's a good point too. Did you have trucks there to then move the supplies from those port towns?

ULLAH: *No what we were doing—we didn't have trucks in all the places. Where we had trucks we held them and where we didn't have trucks we took help from WFP.*

PATERSON: Great. Then in contrast to that particular challenge of the helicopter, the flight management, was there a policy that worked extremely well from the beginning, one that you thought oh yes, this was a really great idea.

ULLAH: *Absolutely this is my personal observation. When the crisis started there was no standard policy. The policies rather developed with experience, with the challenges. We started developing some procedures and policies.*

PATERSON: That's what I mean. One of those policies that you developed in response to a problem, did you develop any and after you developed it you thought "that was great" "that worked especially well."

ULLAH: *To be more specific we improved the distribution system of items and especially the management of the incoming cargo goods. We developed that.*

PATERSON: Like the example with the National Election Commission.

ULLAH: Yes.

PATERSON: This is always easiest to say with the benefit of hindsight to say of course for everyone but is there anything that you would do differently if God forbid something like this happened again. Are there any big lessons that you would draw from the experience?

ULLAH: *Yes, definitely lessons are there and people are compiling the lessons. From my—the first lesson especially, the international community, should we have that—all agencies have their specific work. To have a common ground, a common position in this type of crisis like Ebola, there is a need for standard policy procedure, SOP. Maybe it would be coordinated by OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). OCHA is the coordinator of all the humanitarian business. That is number one.*

We face problems because every agency had different procedures. Some agencies had more of what you would call hurdles or bureaucratic things. Some agencies had less. So especially a crisis where everybody is involved there should be a common policy or framework under which these things have to be done.

PATERSON: That is common—.

- ULLAH: *That framework should tell who is capable of doing what, a list that is streamlined. People are not sure who can do what, who cannot do other things. So that is very important.*
- PATERSON: So a framework that would be triggered by another crisis.
- ULLAH: *The framework, you can call it a framework regiment, you can call it a framework organization. The lead agency should be OCHA and that is where all these things should be done.*
- The second thing is it is my observation that UN teams, especially the country team, the UN country team and OCHA they should have interaction with the local government, with the host government, on this plan. The government must also know about it. They must also know the government's capabilities and limitations. That is very important. In the initial days we were not sure who could do what so that took a lot of time. That is also very important.*
- PATERSON: I can see that would be challenging to get to know the government's capacities and limitations.
- ULLAH: *The third is the government should be the lead. The local government should be the lead and the partners will be helping, will be facilitating the government. The ownership of the whole plan, because it will be a national, integrated plan, that should be with the government. In the host country it is structured—unless the government is involved, especially at the county level you cannot do anything.*
- PATERSON: So especially the county level.
- ULLAH: *The government must be in the driver's seat. The partners will be involved.*
- PATERSON: In your perspective was it a government-led response?
- ULLAH: *The government was the lead agency. As you asked me the lessons learned.*
- PATERSON: That was a good idea.
- ULLAH: *That has to be done.*
- PATERSON: What would you consider your own personal most important contribution to the response? One thing that comes to mind is the National Election Commission warehousing but I don't know if you have another thing that you would like to highlight?
- ULLAH: *David, you must appreciate for me it was absolutely a new thing. Though I am a logistician I never dealt in medical emergencies. I was always involved in military planning and disaster management planning in my country during national disasters. This was absolutely different. My contribution? At the individual level to the best of my capability I gave my knowledge, my experience, what I had and to that extent I was working 16 to 17 hours a day. I would often wake up at 5 o'clock or 5:30 that something came up and the ministry is calling me for something urgent. So that was another part.*
- I tried to help the government on behalf of UNMIL. In initial days the government counted on UNMIL. I tried to fulfill their expectations from the UNMIL side so the fight against Ebola could be managed.*

I will not comment on personal attributes. From my point of view that is for my mission leadership or the people who worked with me; it is for them to decide. I won't say. I can tell that in my 28 years of logistic career this period was the most challenging but at the same time it was very rewarding. I learned a lot. I learned how to manage a crisis. I learned how to coordinate when you have more than 30-35 partners. Everybody has got—you know people—finally what we say the global community, it was a diverse culture. I met people from all backgrounds, so this is all my learning. I learned a lot from this crisis.

PATERSON: Are you aware of any new technologies that are beginning to make a difference in improving delivery of supplies or something that would have been useful to have?

ULLAH: *Yes. From what I understand, especially in this particular crisis, all the medical crises have some similarity so what I understand is some particular—in terms of the cold chain there should be a local arrangement, especially in the county headquarters.*

PATERSON: Cold storage?

ULLAH: *Yes, for these medical issues. Secondly we should have a centralized inventory. That is very important. Sometimes we find but we do not know we have things and where it is. Technology can be used in improving the inventory aspect.*

PATERSON: A computerized system.

ULLAH: *Of course, especially the cold chain aspect. Thirdly I understand, in the lessons learned I missed one point. There should be some system that some exercise or rehearsal maybe once or twice a year to validate, whether these procedures or processes are workable or not, maybe a tabletop exercise. You don't go in the field but you check your procedure. You check your inventory, you check your things, whether it is doable or not, the way we do it in the military.*

PATERSON: We're coming to the end now. Are there any key people that you would consider we should interview? I know you mentioned Mr. Linga and ICRC and OCHA.

ULLAH: *I think you can interview in the Military Mr. Linga, Assistant Minister. Did you meet Harris?*

PATERSON: Yes.

ULLAH: *He was the key person. The problem is that all these agencies and the people have been rotated.*

PATERSON: Yes, that has been a problem, thank you for the insight.