

Pakistan: Logistics Officer, DART Team
Islamabad, Pakistan
November 13, 2001 – January 15, 2002

Bill Laspina

Purpose and Background:

The U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) requested Bill Laspina to participate as a member of an OFDA Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) in Islamabad, Pakistan. He served as the Logistics Officer for the team. OFDA is responsible for coordinating the U.S. Government's response to international disaster situations and assist refugees and displaced persons in the area. In this case, Afghanistan.

Mr. Laspina has had several assignments with OFDA in Washington, D.C. and has participated in two international assignments for OFDA, one to Pakistan in 1999 and one to Honduras in 2001.

All salary, travel, and per-diem were reimbursed to BLM through an agreement with the U.S. Forest Service.

Activities:

Mr. Laspina's report is in the form of an article that was published in NIFC's employee newsletter - "Burning Issues"

Bill Laspina's holiday experience was about as atypical as can be imagined. Rather than spending it at home with friends and family, he ended up serving a two-month assignment in Pakistan, helping to provide assistance to the people in neighboring Afghanistan.

Laspina served as an administrative officer for a "Disaster Assistance Response Team," or DART, that was charged with overseeing and accounting for worldwide humanitarian aid destined for the Afghan people. He left Idaho on November 13th, and returned on January 15th. He worked with the International Red Cross, UNICEF, the United Nations, World Food for Peace, and other organizations trying to assist Afghans in need.

"A DART team is just like one of our incident command teams that gets sent to a fire. They both have the same basic management responsibilities, although the DART teams are much smaller," Laspina said.

"My position as the administrative officer was more like what a planning and logistics chief would do on an incident team," he said. "We only had five or six people most of the time on the DART team, so I ended up doing lots of

assignments. I was the administrative officer, the logistics chief, working in security and was the communications officer, too.”

Among his responsibilities was the task of finding local people to “fill out the DART team.” Laspina hired drivers, interpreters, staff assistants and others from the local Pakistani population. The United States has a long-time presence in Islamabad, where Laspina spend most of his time. He had little trouble finding people who were willing, able and ready to be hired to fill out the DART organization.

Laspina also was charged with finding supplies and equipment needed for the humanitarian aid. That meant trips to local markets to purchase the goods and products the team needed. Laspina said that the merchants were happy to do business with him, and that he never felt in danger.

“The reception we received in Pakistan was pretty good. I had lots of contact with the local people in the local markets. I didn’t have a single bad trip,” he said, “I made many new friends.”

But he noticed differences in Peshawr, a city only 45 miles from the Afghan border. “We were always security-conscious, but the farther north we got, the more tension or intimidation I felt,” he says. “I’d go to the market in Peshawr and realize that there were probably Taliban members all around me.”

His driver doubled as a translator, but Laspina says that he was “amazed” at the number of people, particularly merchants, who spoke English.

The work day was long. For the first couple of weeks, 14 to 16 hour days were the norm. It eased off somewhat after that, but days off were rare, and an eight-hour workday unheard of.

“There was lots to do,” said Laspina, “And we had only days to get things done, not weeks.”

The climate and terrain of Islamabad reminds Laspina of southern California. “Lots of rolling hills, scrub oak, and fine, flashy fuels.” Temperatures were mild, highs in the 70s during November, and cooling to the 50’s later in December and January. Pakistan is enduring a five-year drought. It only rained once during Laspina’s stay, “and that was about six drops,” he said.

“Pakistan is on the same longitude as our southeastern states. The fruits and vegetables they grow there are amazing. Heads of lettuce this big” he said, holding his hands about 20 inches apart. “And the flower. There were flower vendors on every street corner.”

Laspina ended up in Pakistan through an agreement, coordinated by the international program's Tom Frey, between BLM and the Forest Service. Most of the requests for international assistance comes from the Office of Foreign Disasters. Frey spent two weeks in Pakistan last fall, serving as a military liaison.

Laspina said that his lasting impression of Pakistan was the remoteness of the country and the poverty that prevailed outside of the major cities.

"It is a very poor country," he said.

Laspina doesn't view his service in Pakistan as anything out of the ordinary.

"I was just doing my job. Whatever I did over there is what I normally do here."

Since returning to the United States, he's been approached to serve in two more assignments, one in West Africa. He had to turn them both down for a variety of reasons. Previously, he worked on assignments in Washington, D.C., on a DART assignment, and did a short tour in Honduras.

Would he like to serve abroad again? Laspina leaves no doubt. "It seems I always got stuck at a desk in DC. I much prefer going out."