

**Air service responds to humanitarian turbulence
Goma, 14th November 2008**

The resumption of fighting between the government and rebels in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has once again brought aid agencies together to provide humanitarian assistance to over one million people displaced by the conflict. The challenges of reaching people who find themselves behind the continually shifting front lines between rebel movements and government forces are huge. Logistical planning remains a key aspect of providing humanitarian aid in the eastern DRC. The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) has played a central role in providing access to aid agencies working in the field through a dedicated air service, called ECHO Flight

Guy Van Eeckhoudt is a former pilot in the Belgian Air Force and now in charge of ECHO Flight in Goma, the centre of humanitarian operations in the eastern DRC.

Question: How has ECHO Flight been affected by the recent upsurge in fighting?

Guy Van Eeckhoudt: As the troops of the rebel general Laurent Nkunda approached Goma, we made a decision to move our two aircraft away from the city so that we could maintain the service. The front line between the government troops and Nkunda's rebels has been just 8 kilometres from the airport where the planes are normally located. The planes are now stationed in Bunia an hour's flight away in the north of North Kivu region from where they are flying a normal schedule to up to forty different locations across the eastern DRC. We respond to the needs of the partners who use the plane and so far we have not flown into territory held by rebel armies.

Q: How does ECHO Flight contribute to the humanitarian aid effort?

GVE: We provide an air link for more than 200 projects across the DRC that the European Commission funds. We carry both our partners' staff as well as any cargo that they may need to run their projects. Since the outbreak of the latest fighting we have transported medical supplies to a partner in Bunia which have been used to treat people caught up in the conflict. Our largest aircraft, the Dash 8 can carry up to 40 metric tons of cargo and it could be called on to carry food aid to internally displaced people anywhere in the region.

Q: How challenging is it operating an air service in the DRC?

GVE: Obviously during a conflict situation there are risks, but we seek to minimize those risks by not flying into conflict areas. Generally, the size of the DRC and the under-developed nature of the country makes running ECHO Flight a considerable logistical challenge. Accessing fuel can sometimes be an issue and some of the landing strips we fly into, especially with our smaller plane, the ten-seater Caravan, are extremely remote and can be surrounded by hills...so they require the pilots to be very experienced in terms of 'bush flying' techniques.

Q: It costs around US\$7.5 million dollars a year to run ECHO Flight. Is that good value for money?

GVE: It is a lot of money, but it is money well spent. The cost includes everything from the booking system to maintenance and flying the schedule. The Dash 8 costs about US\$2900 per hour to fly which is in line with other air operators in the humanitarian sector. ECHO Flight will not compromise its 100% safety record by trying to save money. Indeed, it is one of the few air services in the country which is still accredited by the United Nations to carry UN staff.

Q: What impact would there be if ECHO Flight did not provide an air service to partners?

GVE: The impact would be significant. ECHO Flight serves twenty 'bush' airstrips that no other planes fly to, so in those areas the projects would suffer hugely. Our partners would have to decide whether to travel by road, which may not be possible given the distances and road conditions or to use other airlines which do not have the safety record of ECHO Flight. Inevitably, it would be the Congolese people, the people our partners are working with, who would suffer the most.