

Home Delivery
Special Offer
Click Here

HONDA 
NORTH



INSIGHT

ODYSSEY

ACCORD

[Globe Services](#)
[Globextra](#)
[Send us feedback](#)

[boston.com](#)

▶ **BREAKING NEWS**

The Boston Globe

TUESDAY, MARCH 26, 2002

[Most e-mailed articles](#)
[Free headlines e-mail](#)
[Low-graphics version](#)
[Front page image \(.jpg\)](#)
[Front page image \(.pdf\)](#)

Special Reports

[Beyond the Big Dig](#)
[Priest sex abuse cases](#)
[Lost boys of Sudan](#)
[New culture of giving](#)
[Keep safe from terror](#)
[Secret history of WWII](#)
Other reports

Sections

PAGE ONE
NATION | WORLD
CITY | REGION
BUSINESS
SPORTS
LIVING | ARTS
EDITORIALS | OP-ED

Weekly

[Health | Science](#) (Tue.)
[Food](#) (Wed.)
[Calendar](#) (Thu.)
[Life at Home](#) (Thu.)

Sunday

[Automotive](#)
[Education](#)
[Focus](#)
[Real Estate](#)
[Travel](#)
[Globe Magazine](#)

Local news

[City Weekly](#)
[Globe South](#)
[Globe West](#)
[North Weekly](#)
[NorthWest Weekly](#)
[New Hampshire](#)



Residents retrieving food packets from a US airdrop in northern Afghanistan last October. (AP File Photo)

Food drops found to do little good

(By Elizabeth A. Neuffer, Globe Staff)

The Bush administration's much publicized food ration airdrop in northern Afghanistan - hailed by the Pentagon as a way to feed starving residents while winning their loyalty - achieved neither goal in many targeted areas, military experts, aid workers, and a report by retired US special forces officers now conclude. In their report, obtained by the Globe, the retired officers studied the drops during a two-week period in November in parts of northern Afghanistan.

[[Send this story to a friend](#) | [Easy-print version](#) | [Search archives](#)]

Food drops found to do little good

By Elizabeth A. Neuffer, Globe Staff, 3/26/2002

The Bush administration's much publicized food ration airdrop in northern Afghanistan - hailed by the Pentagon as a way to feed starving residents while winning their loyalty - achieved neither goal in many targeted areas, military experts, aid workers, and a report by retired US special forces officers now conclude.

The report, recently circulated in the Defense Department and on Capitol Hill, found the airdrops so problematic that it called for an end to the project, saying it was not winning the Afghans' trust and was thus "in direct opposition to US military goals." In their report, obtained by the Globe, the retired officers studied the drops during a two-week period in November in parts of northern Afghanistan.

Their findings were echoed by some military officials and aid workers, who said the airdrop last fall of 2.5 million pre-packaged meals, while it brought food to some, was largely ineffective and at times counterproductive.



The bright yellow plastic-wrapped meals ruptured upon impact because they were dropped from too high an altitude and spoiled, endangering the Afghans who ate them, the report by the retired officers said.

Moreover, the meals often were collected by local warlords and sold for a profit at Afghan markets and seldom reached hungry families, according to aid workers. In other cases, Afghans were lured by the bright packages into minefields or confused them with cluster bombs of the same color.

"The impact was marginal," said Kenneth Bacon, the former Pentagon spokesman who now heads Refugees International in Washington, D.C. "Still, some food is better than no food."

Defense Department officials defend the airdrop project as meeting a vital humanitarian need, but acknowledge some improvements are needed.

"I think it was an overwhelming success," said Joseph J. Collins, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Stability Operations, which oversaw the effort. "And the next time we will get smarter from the lessons learned from this experience."

Still, while the Pentagon last fall claimed that the packages were "effective" when dropped at high altitudes, Brian Knapp, a spokesman for the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, an arm of the Defense Department, last week conceded that the rations were not designed to be airdropped at all.

The US military's airdrop in Afghanistan was a small part of the overall US humanitarian effort, which was directed primarily by the State Department. But it was nonetheless large in scale and controversial in its goals.

Daily from October through December, C-17 cargo planes dropped between 34,000 and 70,000 Humanitarian Daily Rations, known as HDRs, mostly over remote areas of northern Afghanistan that aid groups then could not reach.

Hundreds of soldiers were needed to load the planes. Pilots then flew them under hazardous conditions, protected by fighter jets.

Defense Department officials have not put a price tag on the overall effort. But each meal cost about \$4.50.

From the beginning, aid groups criticized the effort as a propaganda campaign that endangered their work by mixing humanitarian needs with military objectives.

Now, interviews with more than a dozen aid workers and former and current US Army special forces officers in Afghanistan point to technical problems with the airdrop project.

"We immediately recognized there was something really, really, wrong," said Lieutenant Colonel Greg Long, a retired special forces officer on a civilian mission in Afghanistan last fall who contributed to the critical report by the nonprofit Partners International Foundation.

Long was stunned to find a child grasping one of the yellow food packages - its wrapping ruptured, possibly from impact - with spoiled food inside.

He went on to examine at least 500 food parcels collected from Northern Alliance territory - from Khojabahuddin and Cha-e Ab to Kunduz in the first two weeks of November. He found that nearly 70 percent of the packages ruptured and exposed their contents. About 90 percent of those had spoiled food.

"The majority of them had a gaseous odor and foul smell," said Long. "There were some Afghans that would eat them. But the majority of them would not."

The foundation's report stated: "Food packs that make [Afghanistan's] people sick is just one more reason to hate the United States in an already volatile environment."

US special forces officers agree, saying such mistakes add to suspicions they already face in places like Afghanistan, making their work harder.

At the Defense Department, Collins said that there were some early "bad drops" but that he had no evidence of people getting sick from spoiled meals, and that Northern Alliance commanders had requested more be dropped. Other officials said American soldiers in Afghanistan reported that the meals landed intact.

"I won't say none broke open, but we are happy with the success rate of the HDRs in Afghanistan," said Frank Johnson, spokesman for the Defense Supply Center in Philadelphia, which orders the food parcels for the airdrop. The HDRs could be successfully dropped from 20,000 feet and hit the ground at 65 miles per hour without breaking open, he added.

But flights over Afghanistan were at much higher altitudes to avoid anti-aircraft fire - between 30,000 and 40,000 feet, Defense Department officials say.

"Humanitarian daily rations do not do well at high altitudes," said Jerry Whitaker, a spokesman for the Natick-based US Army Soldiers Systems.

A 1999 test by the labs shows the survivability rate for rations dropped from high altitudes ranged between 25 and 100 percent, officials say. The largely liquid main courses were the most likely to split open upon impact.

As Afghanistan's skies became safer for US planes, airdrops were carried out at lower altitudes, making it more likely that packages landed intact, he said.

Spoiled food was not the only hazard. Several observers point out that hungry Afghans frequently ate small packages of a substance included in the packets that was not meant to be eaten but to absorb moisture.

The Afghans, however, did not recognize the universal symbol telling them it was inedible - a circle with a line through it. Long found 35 Afghans who complained of being ill after mistakenly eating the substance.

US defense officials, however, say the substance, which is vitamin-grade iron, is not toxic, although it can make some people feel ill.

While some of the American humanitarian rations made some Afghans sick, they also made others rich. Many of the yellow food packs spotted across Afghanistan were gathered up by warlords and even Northern Alliance commanders who resold them in local markets, according to aid workers and the Partners International Foundation report.

"The least vulnerable didn't get their hands on it," said Christopher Stokes, director of operations for Afghanistan for Doctors Without Borders, the French aid group. "They had been taken over by people with power who needed it the least."

The food parcels' yellow wrapping also created difficulties. Staff with Oxfam, an aid agency, and Afghan demining groups complained that children were lured by the bright colors into minefields and other dangerous areas. UN officials reported on Nov. 29 that two children were killed and three wounded when they ran into a minefield for airdropped rations.

Adding to Afghans' confusion, the color of the food packages resembled that of deadly, unexploded BLU-92 cluster bomblets.

"They have been conditioned through mine awareness to avoid yellow," said Mark Hiznay, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch in Washington, D.C.

Pentagon officials acknowledge that some parcels may have landed in minefields, but they say there are no documented cases of anyone hurt by confusing a cluster bomb with a food ration packet. Nevertheless, the department has decided to change the color of future HDRs from yellow to salmon, Collins said.

Nonetheless, critics said problems with the Afghanistan airdrop should raise questions about the wisdom of US

military airdrops when it is waging a war at the same time.

"The HDR was never envisioned to be used as it is currently used," said Timothy G. Connolly, who directed food drops at the Pentagon during the Clinton administration. "This operation was about one thing: winning international support for a bombing campaign against a country that already had one foot in the Stone Age. The fact that a few folks got some food in the process was just a bonus."

This story ran on page A1 of the Boston Globe on 3/26/2002.

© [Copyright](#) 2002 Globe Newspaper Company.

[[Send this story to a friend](#) | [Easy-print version](#) | [Search archives](#)]