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Press Briefing

PRESS BRIEFING ON TSUNAMI DISASTER

“We are making extraordinary progress in reaching the majority of the people affected in the majority of the areas”, Jan Egeland told correspondents today during a briefing at Headquarters on the United Nations’ response to the tsunami disaster.

Mr. Egeland, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, said that extraordinary obstacles were experienced also in many areas. Nowhere were the problems greater than in northern Sumatra and the Aceh region of Indonesia. There were still bottlenecks, but many of them were being resolved earlier than had been done in similar disasters. Many coastlines had been affected. The Maldives and Seychelles were among the hard hit island States and would be included in the appeals.

The international relief operation centred around humanitarian coordinators that he had appointed in all affected countries, with extraordinary powers to coordinate a whole country team, he said. Geneva, the “humanitarian capital of the world”, was the centre of the United Nations’ global response efforts, while in New York the political work was coordinated. In Bangkok the military/civilian coordination and liaison was done, while logistics were coordinated in Rome. As an illustration of the scope of the disaster, he said that in Sri Lanka, half of the provinces had been severely affected by the tsunami, with 780,000 displaced persons living in some 800 camps. Only the most northern coastal province did not have displaced persons.

He spent, however, most of his time on northern Sumatra and Aceh, Mr. Egeland continued. There, the problems with airports and airstrips were extraordinary. Too much had to be flown to Medan, to the south of the area, from where convoys had to drive into the affected areas, which was a costly and time-consuming procedure. On the top of his wish list were C-17 aircraft, some of the biggest military transport aircraft made. The United Kingdom had promised one which would also shuttle earth-moving equipment to expand the Medan airport. There was a need for more trucks, helicopters, aircraft, landing craft, base camps and more water-treatment units, among other things. Singapore would send two hangar carriers to the Sumatra coast.

The reason why his organization had not woken up earlier to the disaster in Sumatra was that there was nobody to notify Headquarters, he said. The tsunami there had been like an explosion along the low-lying coastline and many villages had disappeared. The total toll was not known yet.

He “respectfully” disagreed with those saying that there had been too little effort in the early phase in the United States and European countries, saying that Member States had reacted “first class”. From the United States to the European Union to the countries in the region, there had been immediate support for everything that had to be done. The growing amount of donations was now well above \$2 billion, he said. It would be the “ultimate irony” if the year was started with unprecedented global generosity and ended with no money for those most in need in the “forgotten and neglected emergencies” in Africa and elsewhere. He urged that the money pledged be delivered.

Answering correspondents’ questions about the coordination of the global relief effort, Mr. Egeland said it was now amply proven that, if anybody could coordinate the world’s generosity, it

was the United Nations. All agencies were working together. He was working with non-governmental organizations, 40 to 50 donor countries and a dozen affected countries at the local, regional and national levels. The United Nations had been effective but could become more so. In that regard, he emphasized better regional response mechanisms.

Asked whether he felt that the response to the disaster could alleviate religious and political strife in some areas, he said the United Nations was now operating with full access in areas that were previously restricted, such as in Aceh. In Sri Lanka, there were now joint teams of the two parties to the conflict. He hoped there could be a confidence-building element in the unprecedented international operation that could, maybe, lead to reconciliation and conflict resolution.

Asked about the number of victims and of displaced persons, he said it would be correct to say that more than 150,000 human beings had perished. He did not know how many more there would be, as he was waiting for an assessment of the Indonesian authorities on victims in Sumatra. Although the number of identified victims had been confirmed at 144,000, there were many more officially and unofficially missing. The number of displaced persons in Sri Lanka had been confirmed at some 780,000, but there were hundreds of thousands displaced in northern Sumatra and Aceh. Altogether there would be much more than 1 million people displaced and 5 million would need assistance.

Between \$2 and \$3 billion had been pledged, he said in reply to correspondents' questions, including the money from the World Bank for humanitarian assistance and from the Asian Bank for reconstruction. Sizeable donations had come in from Japan (\$500 million available for the emergency phase), the European Union, Sweden and Italy. The operation had not been delayed "by a minute" because of a lack of generosity by any donor. There was a possibility of "double accounting" here and there, as some money that had been pledged for development assistance would now be pledged for the relief effort. There was a need for a mechanism for overseeing the money and holding the donors to their pledges.

He said the flash appeal to be launched on 6 January by the Secretary-General was an appeal for Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Somalia, and possibly for Thailand and the Seychelles for the coming six months for humanitarian emergency spending. The Secretary-General would announce the money needed based on assessments made in Geneva. The appeal would be as consolidated as possible. The money would have to foot the Red Cross and Red Crescent bill, the United Nations bill and long-term reconstruction.

The role of the private sector was extremely important, he continued. He had spoken to President Clinton. Calls had come in around the clock from people offering everything, from medical and pharmaceutical equipment to transport and logistics. A big task was to convert that to assistance in the field as soon as possible, as many in the field were now overworked. Non-governmental organizations were often able to take many of the offers and put them into place quickly, but everything had to be coordinated. He was pleased to note that non-governmental organizations were acting by the book, following coordination from the United Nations or the Red Cross/Red Crescent system.

Although the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs had some 50 highly specialized people in the field, the United Nations worked with local employees, as they spoke the language and knew the society. They, in turn, worked with local non-governmental organizations.

Asked why the response in Sumatra and Aceh had been slow, although it had been clear that the earthquake's epicentre had been from Sumatra's coast, he said the country team in Jakarta had started to work immediately. His office had lost three colleagues in Aceh. The devastation along Sumatra's coastline had been much worse, but there was no telecommunication there. The coastline had changed there in such a way that the sea maps used for navigation were obsolete. All ports were gone, and many ships did not dare to come close to the coast for fear of hitting something.

He was in daily communication with Washington, and whatever request was made was met with an immediate and positive answer. He respectfully disagreed with those who said the United

States had been slow. "The US could not have been more proactive or more active seen from the UN point of view", he said. The Americans had made a commitment to help with a C-17 airplane. He was also asking the Americans for coordination of the helicopter capacity. There were now about 40 to 50 military and civilian helicopters actively involved, and it was a matter of time before a big and well-coordinated helicopter-borne aid operation along the coastline could get going. That operation would have to continue for some time, and it was hard to get hangar ships "hanging around" for a very long time. Countries had to take turns in that regard. It was, therefore, a big military/civilian humanitarian operation.

He said the role of his office was the "oil in the machinery" -- to bring what was needed for the airport, for housing aid and coordination, and to make the operation work. Many of the bottlenecks in Medan and other places had been cleared, thanks to dozens of experts that had arrived within 48 hours.

The situation regarding diseases was worsening in areas that had not been reached, he continued. In Sri Lanka, the relief work in the hardest hit areas, with the greatest numbers of displaced persons, was going well. The spread of diseases, such as pneumonia, other respiratory diseases and diarrhoea was being curbed. He was afraid, however, that, in time, malaria would also occur. He had not heard of cholera yet, but a lot of children died from diarrhoea, and that was on the increase in areas that had not been reached.

Responding to a question on the quality of relief efforts in India, he said the Indian Government had not requested assistance. India, Thailand and Malaysia were generally doing a great job in coping with the disaster, but he was willing to help if requested. He was impressed with the local, regional and national efforts.

Asked about the phrase "competitive compassion" he said he would rather have competitive compassion than no compassion at all. He had referred to a situation where a community of 30 to 40 "very rich" societies were not willing to foot the bill of feeding the children of the world. An estimated 30,000 children a day died from preventable diseases and neglect. That was a "tsunami every week", he said. If the current compassion was "competitive compassion", he would like to see more of that as long as it was an equal compassion for everybody.

"It hurts as much to be wounded in the Congo as in Kosovo, it hurts as much to be displaced in Sudan as in Sri Lanka. It is as terrible to see your child dying from diarrhoea in Banda Aceh as to see your child dying from diarrhoea in Guinea", he said.

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