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Press Briefing

PRESS BRIEFING ON TSUNAMI DISASTER

Providing his daily update today on disaster relief to the millions affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami on what he called "T-Day plus 12", Jan Egeland said that, with the exception of Sumatra-Aceh, relief workers would soon reach nearly all of those in desperate need of blankets, tents, food, water and sanitation, but they would not have healed the mental scars.

The United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator said he had seen many times before a kind of complacency that, once the life-saving assistance had been rendered, the job had sort of been solved. "We are not even close to solving the job problem at this point", he said, adding that the affected persons had lost everything -- their children, their homes, schools, local communities, and livelihoods. It was when that was rebuilt that those involved in the overall effort could think they had done the job as they should.

Reporting on today's international conference in Jakarta for assistance to the Tsunami victims, Mr. Egeland said the humanitarian community had very much welcomed the meeting and its declaration, which had recognized two things: that the affected countries themselves should be in charge of relief assistance in their countries and that the United Nations was here to coordinate the international response and help forge solidarity between nations. He had just spoken with the Secretary-General, who had said he had been very pleased with the meeting's outcome, as well as with all of the bilateral talks with heads of State.

Holding up his copy of the flash appeal, he said that had been an impressive achievement because, in those 80 pages and through the many thousands of hours, an action plan had also emerged. So, the appeal was not only one for help, but contained a concrete action plan on a regional basis detailing what needed to be done now to save lives in Indonesia, the Maldives, Myanmar, Seychelles, Somalia and Sri Lanka. As part of the consolidated appeals process, a strategy planning process had led to a comprehensive humanitarian action plan encompassing the following elements: a resource mobilization tool, a coordination programme implementation tool, and a joint monitoring and evaluation tool, which allowed for revisions when necessary and the reporting back to affected communities and donors on achievements and shortcomings.

In all, 40 relief agencies as well as all United Nations Agencies, and large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in Europe, North America and Asia had been involved in preparing the appeal, he said, adding that there had also been strong coordination with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The last time a comparable appeal had been launched was in the wake of hurricane Mitch at the end of 1998, which had affected the five Central American nations. That appeal had been for \$153 million for the 3 million affected persons. The appeal launched today had been for \$977 million, for the approximately 5 million affected persons. In the current disaster, even more people had lost their lives, their communities and their livelihoods. In the past, flash appeals had been more of a blunt instrument, whereas today, they were more of a precision instrument.

This morning, as in every morning since 26 December, he had participated in a number of operational meetings with people "piped in" from the field, he said. What had emerged today was basically that there were two sets of operations under way. The first was a very large, more traditional natural disaster relief operation in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, India, Somalia, Thailand and elsewhere. Some of those operations had been undertaken primarily by the national authorities and

others, primarily by the international community. In all of them, "phenomenal" progress was being made in terms of covering the basic needs of the affected millions.

He said that the other set of operations concentrated on the epicentre of the catastrophe, which was in the Aceh and Sumatra provinces on the island of Sumatra. There, "big progress" was being made daily. Many more people were being reached with many more services today than yesterday, although enormous problems remained, as that was the "road-less, communication-less" part of the affected areas. He did not think he was even close to having the figures how many had died or were missing, or even severely affected. Hundreds of villages had been razed. People had moved inland from the coast, and along the coast, very few remained. So many people had been swept away, and the rest had fled towards the forest and hills, where there was water.

There might be 200 improvised camps, which could be "home" for the time being to hundreds of thousands of people, he continued. The total number of people who had lived on that coast had been hard to get, but that could be 1 million. The Meulaboh-Medan road had been cleared and was becoming operational. For security reasons, however, it had taken time to gain access. That opening would make it easier to reach more people. All resources now were focused on reaching out to the people in that area, and there might be hundreds of thousands. A matrix was being made to determine all available civilian, humanitarian, and military resources put at the disposal of the operation, especially in Indonesia. It was critical to have that full detailed overview because the effort needed to know when certain assets were leaving, that gaps were being filled, and so forth.

He said he just had a phone call from Javier Solana (the European Union's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy), who promised that the Union would be among those that would help oversee the matrix exercise.

Asked what difference reports this morning of the dissolution of the United States-led core group made to him, as well as to respond to comments made by United States Secretary of State, Colin Powell, about the need for United Nations agencies to get on the ground and start doing their part, Mr. Egeland said the decision about the core group had been made at one of their joint meetings. The group would "phase itself out and phase in" to overall United Nations coordination. He and his team would still keep very close contact with the core group members, as those countries were providing some of the biggest assistance and biggest assets on the ground.

As to the second part of the question, he said he readily admitted that the effort needed to be stronger on the ground. The United Nations was doing an enormous job already, with hundreds of people working, but it needed to build up more and it could and would do so dramatically in next few days. Compared to the immediate deployment possibility of a military force, the build-up was more modest, but it would continue to deploy. No one could have done a flash appeal in 10 days the way the United Nations and its partners had done, he added. Everybody had complemented each other -- those who could provide "hardware" provided "hardware", and those who could give "software" gave it.

He added that the core group had been essential for the first few days, but he agreed with Secretary Powell that it had served its purpose, and it was now better that it phase in to the overall effort. Informally, however, there would be many core groups.

Replying to a question about whether the entire appeal for hurricane Mitch had been received by the end, and whether the \$3.5 billion pledged for the tsunami had also included credits or loans, he said that what he had received overall for the societies devastated by Mitch had been \$682 million. Mitch was an example of billions of dollars pledged and much less actually received. He did not have all the figures before him, including for the overall reconstruction effort.

In the current effort, he said his office was in the process of tracking down all pledges to find out what was cash, what was in kind, what had been already pledged to those countries for development assistance and was now reappearing, what was for one year, what was up to five years, and what were loans and grants. There would be billions in aid for longer-term reconstruction. He also sought to determine how much the societies themselves would carry.

There were more than 20 pages of contributions. Some of them contained concrete figures, while others had a "zero" by them because the exact value of the contribution -- say 100 doctors, for example -- could not be known.

In response to a related question, he said that the most important thing now in terms of the financing was that the flash appeal received the funds immediately. His appeal to donors making generous pledges was for them to earmark the monies, such as to the regional component, or to Indonesia, Somalia and so forth. Together with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank and the Red Cross, he and his colleagues would talk to all of the donors and see how best they could commit funds as early as possible to the various phases of the assistance effort. Also crucial was to know in detail what the pledges really meant. For example, Australia's pledge, which was the biggest, was for a five-year period.

He said to another question that his team had never aspired to command anybody's military assets. Very good cooperation was now being established, and his requests had had a positive response by the United States and all other military forces. Some had put their military assets at his disposal, like the Singaporeans, others had said they would retain charge. Either way was fine.

Already tens of millions had been spent because the pace of the relief effort had been great, he replied to another question. A lot had been spent through local and national non-governmental organizations, which did not necessarily provide details about what they had done. For its part, the United Nations would account for and report on every penny spent and every single resource provided. He did not know exactly how many millions of dollars had been spent already, but it was many.

The Australians had said clearly that, for the emergency humanitarian relief phase, they wanted to coordinate very closely with the United Nations and work within its structures, he said to a further query. But, Australia's phenomenal pledge over some years would be part of a bilateral cooperation agreement.

Asked about reported clashes between the Indonesian military and rebels in Aceh, he said he was concerned about the security situation, but he had not heard about clashes between the rebels and the army, only of several security incidents, including kidnapping attempts and hijackings of some relief assets here and there. That seemed to be the result of general banditry in a region full of small arms and full of many groups. He reiterated his appeal to the parties to keep the ceasefire and suspend the conflict. If there was conflict -- everything would basically become paralyzed. He had been heartened that no conflict had occurred in Aceh, Sri Lanka or Somalia so far.

To a question about United Nations' efforts to identify the dead, he said that that process, to a large extent, was non-UN and being led by the countries themselves. In Thailand and elsewhere, the authorities were undertaking that task together with international expertise. Everyone had to be aware that very, very many of the victims had been swept away and many would not reappear. The estimate of 150,000 dead was a "very low figure that will be much bigger".

He said he would probably not be prepared to give a new figure for some time because that depended on the extent to which communities inland off the Aceh Sumatra coast were reached and then how many inhabitants were interviewed. If some 30 per cent or more of the population had been swept away or killed, then the figure could be very, very large.

Today was the first day of ground visits and assessments along the west coast of Aceh, he replied to another question. The road had been opened and cleared, but roads along the coast had been totally devastated. Fleets of large vehicles and trucks were now being set up so that assistance could be given more and more by road, which was the only sensible way. That was being done, as correspondents knew, by helicopter because that had been the only way. And, that had been very valuable.

A colleague at UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) had already confirmed a few cases of totally horrendous attempts to traffic children. That was not yet a big problem because it

was still so early, but that could become a big problem over time and that must be stopped now. A lot was being done in that regard to raise awareness and monitor the many vulnerable women and children and orphans.

To a question about the response to the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, he said that as the tsunami situation evolved, he was increasingly satisfied with how the world was responding and increasingly nervous for all of the forgotten and neglected democracies. Perhaps the worst was in the Democratic Republic of the Congo -- the one area in the world where most people were dying from neglect and the lack of an international presence. More resources and a greater presence were needed there. That would also ensure that the horrendous sexual abuse and violence were stopped, which reportedly was rampant and ongoing.

He added that there were as many nameless victims in eastern Congo and in Darfur, in west Sudan, in a year as there might be in the tsunami-stricken societies. He hoped the world would be equally compassionate with those defenceless victims in Africa. The estimate of 1,000 deaths daily in the Congo was accurate; he had studied the methodology of the study by the International Rescue Committee and he believed that was an accurate, if not conservative, estimate. That amounted to 365,000 deaths per year. Perhaps the biggest scandal of our generation in recent years had been what had happened in the Great Lakes region, even after the genocide in Rwanda. And that was continuing.

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