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Press Briefing

PRESS BRIEFING ON TSUNAMI RELIEF EFFORT

Battling bad weather, washed out roads and clogged airports, United Nations agencies were working with local governments, foreign militaries and civic groups in pressing ahead with relief efforts in the countries affected by the massive Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami that left an arc of destruction from Thailand to the Horn of Africa a little more than two weeks ago, a top emergency official said today.

“Collectively, we at the United Nations, the Red Cross movement, NGOs and [affected] governments are making great strides, but there are still many major human needs to be met in full”, said Kevin Kennedy, Director of the Coordination and Response Division in the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Giving an update during a press briefing at the world body’s New York Headquarters this afternoon, he said that, while weather and difficult terrain had made aid delivery difficult in Indonesia, relief agencies were starting to “get a handle on things” in Thailand, the Maldives and the Seychelles. An even bigger task loomed as overall recovery in the wake of such devastation was a long-term process, especially the rehabilitation of infrastructure, the rebuilding of schools, clinics and other institutions.

Particularly in the Maldives, where Secretary-General Kofi Annan was visiting today, major distribution of relief items was under way by the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the World Health Organization (WHO), he said. Still, the geographic specificities of the Maldives, with its 200-plus islands and persistently inclement weather over the past two or three days, had proved challenging.

But the good news in that case was that a United States navy ship was set to arrive in the Maldives tomorrow with a huge amount of equipment and a large number of vehicles, he said. “Working with the United States, we’ll be able to utilize landing crafts, desalination equipment, and motorized barges to both improve water and sanitation and reach out to many of the islands that we’ve had trouble accessing.”

Turning to Sri Lanka, he reported that, as more bodies had been located and identified, the death toll now exceeded 37,000. The WFP’s major distribution effort was continuing apace, and the agency now believed that nearly all of the 750,000 people who needed immediate food assistance had been reached. United Nations and other global agencies were working with the Government and its newly-established Centre for National Operations in coordinating the relief effort throughout that country.

He spotlighted UNICEF’s push throughout the region — although at this point, the most pronounced efforts could be seen in Sri Lanka — to help governments reopen schools. “Getting kids back into the classroom is important to get on with their educations and to return some normalcy to their lives.” UNICEF hoped to work with the Sri Lankan Government to get all the schools reopened there by 20 January. That “ambitious” programme would require transporting to Sri Lanka supplies for just over 250,000 students, including “Schools-in-a-Box”, furniture, tents and uniforms.

Returning to Indonesia, the “centre of gravity” in terms of the relief operations, he said the death toll now exceeded 115,000 and the country’s wrecked infrastructure remained the primary challenge to system-wide efforts to reach all the affected populations. “I can’t tell you that we have reached every spot, but we are closing in on the spots we had been unable to reach before -- particularly on Sumatra’s western coast — with great help from the foreign militaries and with the use of their helicopters.” The United Nations had established a field base along that coast in Mulabo.

Overall, one of the principal concerns of the United Nations was getting a more precise and refined handle on the exact needs of the people in the tsunami-devastated region, he said. To that end, WHO and other United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations were set to start tomorrow a major health assessment of all those affected in Sumatra, principally with the help of the United States and other militaries. Further, over the next six days, some 40 other assessments were scheduled to focus on immediate health needs, as well as water and sanitation.

He went on to spotlight one of the most heartbreaking consequences of the disaster: the separation of families. The global community had rightly focused on the large number of orphans left in the tsunami’s wake, as well as parents still searching for their children three weeks into the recovery efforts, he said, praising the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross, which was leading tracing efforts throughout the region. Those concerned about the safety of their loved ones could log on to www.familylinks.icrc.org.

Drawing attention to the ministerial-level meeting set to take place tomorrow in Geneva, he said that ministers from some 30 countries — both donors and affected Member States -- were expected to attend, and the focus would be on resources and assistance. The discussions would also centre on confirming pledges and allocating resources already in play, in an effort to “clarify the whole money picture in general” and the overall response to the tsunami crisis.

In a related development, he added that United States accounting firm Price Waterhouse Coopers had offered its services pro bono to the United Nations to help improve the tracking of assistance being provided to the victims of the tsunami. The Secretary-General had welcomed the “generous and timely offer”, and an initial round of technical discussions had been held over the weekend on how the company’s services could best be used. Price Waterhouse could also assist the United Nations and its partners with prompt investigation into any credible allegations of fraud, waste or abuse if any such charges arose regarding the relief effort.

In response to several questions on the Price Waterhouse offer, he said that, while he could not say that this was the first time ever that such a programme had been initiated, it was the first time in his experience that an outside accounting firm had been used at such a juncture. The company had been briefed over the weekend on how the United Nations generally handled the tracking of relief funds. The system was rather advanced, but basically voluntary, so monies might be pledged by a government in some form or fashion but unless it was officially recorded, it was not reflected in the system.

Noting that there had always been a general interest in tracking the allocation of relief funds, he said that, if more people were now concerned that money given to the United Nations and its humanitarian partners should be used more efficiently and effectively, and if the effort with Price Waterhouse Coopers added to transparency and credibility, so much the better.

Saying that he did not think the ongoing investigation into the “oil-for-food” Programme would affect donations to the tsunami relief effort, he recalled that last year, some \$2 billion had been contributed in response to humanitarian appeals. If there had been any real concerns about how monies were received or expended, those donations might not have been given. “So, while we are reasonably confident in the procedures we have in place, this programme will enhance our ability to track money and make sure it’s used wisely.”

Responding to another question he said there had been no reports of malaria outbreaks in the wake of the tsunami, though the affected region was in the “malaria belt”. Still, agencies on the ground expected to handle more cases of respiratory illnesses. In Aceh, the Indonesian military had

not blocked aid efforts, and fresh fighting in the area had not affected relief work. However, that was certainly a concern, and all agencies on the ground were monitoring the situation closely.

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