

12/01/2005



Press Briefing

PRESS BRIEFING ON TSUNAMI RELIEF EFFORT

Yesterday's ministerial meeting in Geneva on humanitarian assistance to tsunami-affected areas had been a singular success, a senior representative of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) told correspondents at a Headquarters press briefing today.

Providing correspondents with an update on the latest developments in the South Asian disaster relief effort, Kevin Kennedy, Director of OCHA's Coordination and Response Division, said that at last count, Member States had confirmed some \$756 million against the requirements listed in the flash appeal issued last week. OCHA was working with donors to see which resources had been earmarked against specific projects and which had been unearmarked -- to be used as the Organization saw fit. The bottom line was that it had been a very successful event. "I don't believe that we have ever received this type of commitment, this fast, in response to any other emergency", he said.

A number of non-traditional donors -- China and the Russian Federation -- had been involved in the event, he noted, adding that the United Nations welcomed the participation of all Member States in supporting the needs of those affected by the tsunami.

Turning to developments on the ground, he said that the Indonesian authorities in Aceh Province had issued an instruction, which, according to an initial understanding of the matter, would require humanitarian staff operating in the province to register with the Government. Movements outside Banda Aceh City and its surrounding areas, as well as Meulobah, also had to be authorized. On the western side of Sumatra, military escorts were required. Margareta Wahlström, United Nations Special Coordinator for the tsunami response, was meeting with authorities in Banda Aceh today to obtain clarification and assess the operational impact -- if any -- of the announcement. While the Organization understood that there had been a conflict in Aceh for the past 25 years, any requirements that would create additional bottlenecks or otherwise adversely affect operations would have to be carefully reviewed.

Operations on Sumatra and in the greater Aceh area continued to accelerate, he said. The United Nations continued to wrestle with several problems, including throughput at the Banda Aceh and Medan airports. OCHA was working with the Indonesian Government to resolve those problems. An offer from Denmark had been accepted to provide additional ground handling teams, which would supplement the work already being done by teams from Australia and Singapore. The World Food Programme (WFP) was in the process of contracting a fast ship to deliver supplies from Malaysia to Sumatra, which would reduce traffic at the two airports.

Turning to Sri Lanka, he said that WFP Executive Director James T. Morris was expected to arrive on Saturday, 15 January, to review operations throughout the country. The agency had dispatched enough supplies to feed some 750,000 people identified as needing food assistance. In particular, WFP was focusing on the nourishment levels of children under the age of five years. The World Bank and the Asia Development Bank had deployed a large multisectoral assessment mission, which aimed to complete, by 21 January, a "quantified damage assessment" to be followed by fuller needs assessments in the following weeks. No major disease outbreaks had been reported in Sri Lanka.

At the operational level, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) continued towards its target of building upwards of 50 latrines a day, he said. UNICEF had deployed water bowsers in the Ampara district and distributed water tanks to hospitals, camps and public areas. The school preparation programme continued, with temporary school shelters being constructed in most districts, as well as in Colombo.

He said that the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which had long been working in the country, had dispatched tonnes of equipment to meet the needs of those displaced by the tsunami, including some 20,000 kitchen sets and 10,000 plastic sheets. It also planned to distribute an additional 6,000 tents from UNHCR's regional supplies, as well as portable warehouses for three different locations in Sri Lanka. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) had just delivered 150 tonnes of water purification equipment donated by Austria. The equipment was expected to be operational today.

In Somalia, the far-western reach of the disaster, the tsunami had struck the north-eastern part of the country, a region known as Puntland, he said. UNICEF was assisting some 12,000 people in villages there. It was a very remote area and the agency was focusing its efforts on an approximately 650-kilometre coastal stretch that had suffered particularly severe damage.

In Myanmar, the distribution of food by WFP, working with the non-governmental organization ADRA, had begun today in the Irrawaddy delta district, he noted. They were also working with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to provide a 30-day supply of food to more than 3,000 people. Later this week, distribution would commence to an additional 15,000 people, who comprised the core of those affected by the tsunami in Myanmar.

Before Mr. Kennedy took questions, Stéphane Dujarric, Associate Spokesman for the Secretary-General, noted that earlier today in Mauritius, the Secretary-General's Spokesman had issued a statement in which the Secretary-General welcomed the generous pledges and, more importantly, firm commitments announced in Geneva yesterday in response to the flash appeal.

Asked whether the United Nations had a policy opposing or accepting military escorts when it came to aid convoys, Mr. Kennedy replied that the Organization accepted military escorts on an exceptional basis. The United Nations had used military escorts in certain situations, in Burundi, for example. Given the security situation in that country, it would not have been able to deliver assistance without them. That was an exceptional case, however, and it preferred to operate without them. If security threat assessments indicated that military escorts were not required, it did not use them. "But we remain flexible as required", he added.

The official position of several United Nations partners was that they would not, under any circumstances, use military escorts, he continued. That was why the issue had to be worked out with government authorities to understand exactly what they meant and how it might impact operations. The Special Coordinator was taking up the issue with the Indonesian authorities.

Asked if the Government had provided reasons as to why humanitarian staff had to be registered outside Sumatra and Banda Aceh, he said that it had not, but that was reasonably standard practice. When operating in a sovereign State, the authorities were told who was there, where they were going and what work they were doing. Much of the work was done in cooperation with local authorities.

Responding to a question about how many United Nations agencies would participate in Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland's fast-tracking system for contributions to tsunami relief, he replied that he would imagine that all the relevant agencies working in the region would participate in the system. The Organization was working with Price Waterhouse Coopers to strengthen its tracking system and its ability to follow money. Discussions with that firm were continuing. Hopefully, in the next few days there would be an understanding of what services it would be able to provide and how it would work. The idea was to track, as best as possible, all the monies pledged against the tsunami relief operation. While it was easier to track the monies pledged specifically against the United Nations appeal, OCHA also hoped to put in place a system

to monitor the second tier of funds that were not pledged against the appeal but against tsunami relief, redevelopment or recovery.

Asked about reports that foreign troops would have to leave Indonesia by the end of March, he replied that while much progress had been made in meeting immediate needs, the capacities needed to meet needs further down the road were under review. In that regard, it would be premature to answer that question.

The most striking feature of the crisis had been people's overwhelming generosity, he stressed. OCHA received dozens of phone calls daily and while it would do its best to track money and donations, they were coming from thousands of different sources and going to hundreds, if not thousands, of different programmes. OCHA could best track those programmes under the United Nations appeal and would do its best to go beyond that as well. How best to do that would be worked out with Price Waterhouse Coopers. Obviously, the United Nations was very interested in being accountable and transparent.

OCHA communicated with donor countries on a regular basis and there were procedures on how to report pledges and commitments, including when they were converted to cash, he continued. It was very detailed reporting, however, and compliance with the procedures was not what one would always wish. Hopefully, the system would be improved in response to the crisis.

Asked what would happen when the money did not come through, he explained that if an organization received a pledge from a donor, but the pledge was not received, that organization had the primary responsibility of following up exactly where the money was. While OCHA tried to follow up as best it could, many pledges were outside the appeal and were worked out over years, in some cases, between a donor government and the recipient State. Beyond the immediate emergency stage, tracking was a bit harder. Other emergencies arose and donors sometimes shifted money from "emergency A", which was no longer an emergency, to "emergency B", a point made at yesterday's ministerial meeting in Geneva.

In response to another question, he said he had no estimate of the total economic damage caused by the tsunami, as the focus of the United Nations had been on the immediate humanitarian impact.

* * * * *