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## Press Briefing

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### PRESS BRIEFING ON TSUNAMI RELIEF EFFORT

With teams of international aid workers and soldiers toiling side-by-side to deliver food and medical supplies and clear away rubble in tsunami-devastated villages across South Asia, the top United Nations emergency relief official today said that the really hard work was about to begin: providing a life for millions of traumatized and homeless survivors now scattered across 12 countries.

Briefing the press at United Nations Headquarters in New York, Jan Egeland, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, said that two and a half weeks into the massive recovery effort in the tsunami-hit region -- which stretched from Thailand across the Indian Ocean to the Horn of Africa -- nearly all the vulnerable populations had been reached.

The questions relief workers were getting from the survivors no longer concerned food or medicines, but when could they return to their homes and what sorts of livelihoods they would have when they got back. Mr. Egeland said that many of the people were understandably frustrated because for now, there were no clear answers about their futures. In Sri Lanka for instance, United Nations agencies were trying to help the Government get children back to schools, but there were perhaps 250,000 homeless people living in them. "These people need to have proper shelter", he said, "so we can work with the Government to release the buildings."

And while he believed that health organizations and a supporting cast of doctors and clinicians from around the globe had helped stave off a deeper tragedy such as an outbreak of water-borne or respiratory diseases had been largely successful, he acknowledged that aid workers helping to dig out hard-hit areas of Indonesia were facing an uphill battle because flood damage and washed out roads had limited relief efforts to helicopter deliveries.

"We're making progress in the Banda Aceh area, but it is basically an airborne operation", he said, "We need to be able to reach the people on the ground there, if we are going to prevent a second wave of casualties." One positive note was that trucks were now able to reach the coastal town of Malabo. But even that hopeful trend had a troubling downside because even though food deliveries could now get through regularly, the roads to the town could not bear the weight of the heavy trucks and equipment needed to bring in fuel. So the fuel needed to be brought in by ship, which required that fuel "bladders" be strung across the beaches.

"These are the kinds of complications we're trying now trying to deal with, and unfortunately our progress has been slower than we would have liked", Mr. Egeland said. Humanitarian officials on the ground were also struggling to coordinate the loads on incoming relief and equipment. He said that some estimates had placed the cost of the unprecedented relief effort at between \$6-10 million, so officials were trying to find ways to match equipment with needs and to ensure that overall, delivery routes and infrastructure were repaired and reinforced so deliveries could be made as quickly and effectively as possible. There was also a push to get security measures under control, he said.

Giving the latest local figures provided by Indonesian authorities, Mr. Egeland said that the number of dead was increasing by the day and now stood at some 118,000. His representative in Banda Aceh said that local authorities were retrieving between 2- to 3,000 bodies a day. Sadly, that

number was expected to grow. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) remained at about 500,000.

What was most troubling was the spiralling estimates of the huge numbers of people still unaccounted for, he said. Not having a firm figure, he said that presently it might be double the number of dead. There was hope, however, that many of the missing might be found later in the mountains, forests or even other villages. Still, in terms of the breadth of the operations in Indonesia, "this is far from being over in Aceh and Sumatra", he said.

Asked about Indonesia's deadline for all foreign military relief operations to leave by 26 March, he said: "I hope that our Indonesian friends and colleagues will accept it is the needs of the population that will decide when military assets should be phased out completely. "There will be many more weeks for a very substantive military presence", he added, noting that military assets at the moment focused on helicopters, transport planes and the production of millions of litres of clean water.

"All of these things can be taken over by civilians and we will need less of that, but I would foresee that we may need the military people to give us fuel, to give special kinds of hardware very quickly to certain areas beyond March and I hope really we can have an agreement on that", he said.

The United Nations was now negotiating with governments for the use of 10 helicopters, which would slowly take over the work being done by the huge contingent of international military forces on the ground. Mr. Egeland commended the excellent relationship between relief organizations and those military assets in the region, and he had been pleased by reports that no government planned to pull out their assets until they could be assured there was no longer any need for them.

Turning to another important issue, Mr. Egeland introduced Japanese Ambassador Kenzo Oshima, former Chief of OCHA, to discuss next month's World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Japan. With 3 billion people living in areas prone to natural disasters, the milestone event was expected to increase the international profile of disaster risk reduction and promote integration of risk reduction into development planning and practice. So far, 140 governments and 130 non-governmental organizations were set to participate. Among the expected 4,000 participants would be hundreds of the world's top scientists in the field of early warning and disaster preparedness.

In his capacity as Japan's permanent representative to the United Nations, Mr. Oshima said his country was pleased and honoured to welcome all those headed to Japan to consider ways to mitigate and reduce the impact of natural hazards. Such events affected many more people every year than did conflicts, he added. Disaster-reduction issues had been relegated to technical and scientific forums, but the devastation wrought by the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami had thrown into stark relief the need for broad discussions, at all levels, about disaster preparedness.

"Prevention is always better than the cure", Mr. Oshima said, adding it was less painful and less costly. The United Nations had always encouraged the integration of disaster reduction into national development planning, particular in developing countries, to help develop a culture of prevention.

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