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Press Briefing

PRESS BRIEFING ON TSUNAMI RELIEF EFFORT

One month after the biggest earthquake in 40 years had affected 12 countries thousands of miles of ocean apart, United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland said today at Headquarters that the humanitarian response had been “remarkably, perhaps singularly, effective, swift and muscular”.

Acknowledging that the earthquake-triggered tsunami had taken more than 200,000 lives, Mr. Egeland said that the emergency-life-saving phase to save the survivors and avoid a second wave of death, destruction and disease had succeeded in just one month. Normally, such a phase took three or more months, but in this case, and despite monumental obstacles — no roads, few airstrips, no ports and torrential rains — the second death wave had been avoided and a lot of lives had been spared.

Credit was due, first and foremost, to the local communities and national governments, whose responses had been uniquely effective, he said. Secondly, there had been an enormously effective international relief effort by the United Nations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, and hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Thirdly, a bigger and more effective partnership than ever with military forces had emerged, involving 20 foreign militaries and the national militaries of all of the affected nations, bolstering the effort with aircraft, helicopters, naval vessels, search-and-rescue teams, logistical support, air-traffic and handling crews, and so forth.

He said there were still pockets in Aceh and a small one in Somalia where access problems might still be preventing some individuals from receiving aid. But every major group and community of affected persons had received assistance. A nutrition survey had shown that there had been no significant rise in the malnutrition outbreak, and no significant disease outbreak, which was remarkable.

Donors' response had been unprecedented and generous, he said, drawing attention to the \$775 million in firm pledges to the flash appeal for \$977 million. Some \$200 million had been received, and another \$250 million was “in the mail”. Another major achievement had been in the area of logistics. Huge bottlenecks had been foreseen, but most had been solved early on through the identification of alternate routes, airports and transport means. The joint logistical services of the United Nations and its coordination mechanisms had largely worked to his satisfaction.

He said that the military and civilian cooperation, which had been so decisive in those first weeks, was increasingly becoming “civilianized” in the sense that aid organizations would be able to take on more and more of the work each day, as the foreign military participation declined. In Indonesia, the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration had a fleet of 300 trucks and 11 helicopters in Aceh and Sumatra alone, and more would come. Three cargo ships were operational along the coasts and ships' use overall would be increased.

The number of people already receiving food was 1.2 million, and that was likely to increase to perhaps 2 million at the peak, he said. More than 500,000 people had already been provided with clean water. Students were increasingly returning to school; today, 60,000 started school in Aceh and Sumatra, and hundreds of thousands more would return in February.

What lay ahead was the recovery and rehabilitation phase, which had already started, earlier than expected, in some areas of the Aceh province and Somalia, he said. The focus would be on improving shelter for the 250,000 people, in Indonesia alone, who had been given temporary shelter. Clean water, sanitation and health care needed to be sustained and regularized, and livelihoods and communities needed to be rebuilt. There was no room for complacency.

A lot of lives had been saved, but their livelihoods had not been rebuilt, nor had they been provided with a standard of living anywhere near acceptable. That very big task was even bigger than the life-saving emergency phase, and would include hundreds of partners, not only from the United Nations family, but also increasingly from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, bilateral development agencies, and certainly, first and foremost, the national authorities and their ministries.

Hopefully, there would be a smooth handover, not only from the military partners to the civilians, but also from emergency organizations to developmental ones, he said. It had been heartening to see the strong cooperation so far. The United Nations had partnered with many organizations — at times, perhaps too many in some places and too few in others, but generally, that had been going very well. Building and reconstruction would require more discipline, and billions and billions of dollars in assistance.

Asked whether complaints concerning Christian missionary activities by aid workers had affected the United Nations' relationship with secular aid workers, Mr. Egeland said he was very aware of sensitivities in several countries that religious organizations might be too quick to combine relief with missionary services. The two should be delineated, especially in the emergency phase. Similarly, sensitivity was required on the adoption issue, and international organizations had paid due attention to the need to respect local customs.

He added that the Indonesian Government had raised its concerns about Christian organizations being active in Muslim areas, but it had not prohibited any organizations from doing their very important relief work. Many Christian organizations were essential partners in the life-saving effort and did not mix the two things.

Responding to a query about an Oxfam report out today that only a few pledges had actually been paid, Mr. Egeland said he felt it had been going well. He appreciated Oxfam for calling on countries that had pledged money to "pay up". Some, like Japan, had been outstanding -- it had pledged, committed and disbursed and transferred \$229 million within days. Others had not yet transferred the money, but, he added, "we are fine in terms of money and we have received more than enough so far to have at full steam, still, the aid effort".

Altogether, \$450 million had either been received or was on its way, and that was very impressive, he added. There had been \$775 million out of the \$977 million in pledges, and he expected that figure to grow; the flash appeal should be fully covered within the six-month period.

Another correspondent, noting that some Muslim charities had complained of increasingly discriminatory anti-terrorism legislation in the "post-9/11" period, asked how they had performed during the tsunami.

Mr. Egeland said that, in general, those organizations were playing an increasingly important role, citing Islamic Relief as one example. Yet, it was true that anti-terrorism laws had made it difficult for some very good Muslim charities to transfer money out of the Gulf countries to Darfur and other places. Dialogue should persist in that regard with all governments so that anti-terrorism legislation could still allow good charities to do their work.

Asked if the tsunami would get in the way of rich countries giving more development aid, he said he remained hopeful that the tsunami was a wake-up call, not only for natural disasters and the tsunami response, but for humanitarian work in general, and that there would be a positive spillover to the neglected and forgotten emergencies. The jury was still out on that, he added.

He said he would brief the Security Council tomorrow on neglected and forgotten

emergencies in Africa. He would paint a very dramatic picture of how the international community was failing in Africa, whereas it was succeeding on the beaches of the Indian Ocean. In 2005, it should be just as easy to raise money for all those suffering badly around the world.

The United Kingdom's Development Minister, Hilary Benn, had a visionary idea of having one big stand-by fund available in the event of a disaster, he said to another question, so that time was not spent scraping the money together, rather than responding. In the case of the tsunami, the money came immediately. In Darfur, it had taken four months for any meaningful response, and it was the case of Darfur that had been the background for Mr. Benn's proposal.

There were presently two funds, including a central emergency revolving fund, which had been created in the early 1990s during the Kurdish refugee crisis. It had to be replenished by the organizations taking out the money, so those in need were nervous to take it out because they did not know if they could give it back. That was why the idea for a standby fund was a good one.

Replying to another question, he said that the donor base had really been broadened — Equatorial Guinea had given, as well as Algeria, Azerbaijan, Brunei Darussalam, Czech Republic, among others. Guyana, which was now also flooded, had responded, as had Hungary. All of the countries of Eastern and Central Europe had responded, as had some of the Gulf and Asian countries — and that was new and additional money. Latin American countries, including Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, had also contributed through their national Red Cross societies.

Of the \$450 million, \$229 million had come from Japan, he replied to a further question. He now had a total pledge from the United States of \$39 million, all of which had been received; the World Food Programme had received \$28 million from that country. Japan was in a class of its own, but other large donors included Norway, Sweden, the European Commission and Germany.

Responding to a related question, he said he had not seen a dropping off of assistance to Africa, but he had noted the cancellation of some meetings between his colleagues and donors, who said they were too busy with the tsunami. That was disheartening to those in the middle of the crises in Africa. That did not mean that money would not be forthcoming, but it might be delayed somewhat.

To Oxfam's criticism that the Security Council was not doing enough about northern Uganda, he said he would brief the Council on that situation tomorrow, but he did not necessarily share Oxfam's view. The Council had been very good in the past year about putting that situation on its agenda for the first time ever. He did, however, share Oxfam's "big hope" that northern Uganda would remain on the Council's agenda.

Reiterating again, in response to another question, that the world had really come together in a very effective sectoral way to the tsunami tragedy, he said that, if things had gone slower, if it had been "business as usual", there would have been a higher casualty figure. Against all odds and expectations, some assistance had reached even the most remote places.

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