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Press Briefing

PRESS BRIEFING FOR MEMBER STATES ON TSUNAMI

Thirty-two days after nearly 200,000 people had been killed and 12 Indian Ocean countries devastated by a massive tsunami, top United Nations emergency and development officials emphasized the importance of converting pledges into contributions and funding recovery activities, which would allow people of one of the world's most populated and disaster-prone regions to regain their livelihoods.

"Please, even as cameras start to go away and this disaster leaves the headlines, sustain your interest and commitment to rebuilding", Mark Malloch Brown, Chair of the United Nations Development Group, appealed to donors.

Together with Jan Egeland, Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Brown briefed Member States today on the latest developments, lessons learned and the main challenges for the future. Also participating in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)/United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) meeting on the tsunami response were several countries affected by the disaster, as well as donor countries and organizations. Among the speakers, were representatives of the World Bank, the European Union, Germany, Japan, United States, China, United Kingdom, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Mr. Egeland said that the most immediate humanitarian needs on the ground had generally been met: the World Food Programme (WFP) was reaching more than 1.2 million people with food and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and its partners were providing clean water to some 600,000 people. Thanks to rapid response and emergency health programmes, there had been no major outbreaks of communicable diseases. No child was without care due to efforts of families, communities and humanitarian agencies. Even in the most affected areas of Indonesia, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, many schools had been refurbished and were reopening.

He said that to support those programmes, massive logistical operations had been established by the United Nations Joint Logistics Centre. In Indonesia alone, the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration had a fleet of 300 trucks, 11 helicopters and 3 cargo ships. Such a successful early response would not have been possible without some 17 countries' military assistance. However, arrangements were being finalized to gradually replace the military with civilian capacity in the coming weeks. All that had been possible due to the generous response from Member States. On 6 January, the Secretary-General had launched a flash appeal outlining a comprehensive plan of action and requirements for the first six months of 2005.

Turning to the key lessons learned from the relief effort experience, he said that international response had been timely, relevant and effective. Assessment and coordination teams had been dispatched on the day of the tsunami. However, the efforts were stymied by infrastructure and logistical problems, the lack of information capacity and the multiplicity of actors. It was necessary to strengthen existing tools and explore additional mechanisms. It was critical to build up international logistical and communications capacity and be able to provide timely support to national governments dealing with large-scale disasters.

The crisis had offered opportunities like never before to establish cooperation with the private sector, he said. In some countries, private sector funding was matching or even exceeding

official funding. Now it was necessary to tap into those resources. Risk reduction measures needed to be incorporated into the response and recovery activities. Stronger national early warning, coordination and response capacities were needed. Now, needs were being assessed to build additional standby capacities in case of future disasters.

It was also necessary to manage and make effective use of the large flow of resources, he continued. Another challenge was to ensure timely funding for all sectors and appealing agencies. Currently, funding was imbalanced. In an effort to coordinate the funding, daily tables were issued to show which donors had money available and which had pledged to what organizations. In that context, he encouraged donors who had not yet assigned their pledges to finance under-funded agencies. Suggestions had been made to the fully funded agencies to direct new donors to the agencies whose needs were not yet covered.

Mr. Malloch Brown said that it was a sign of remarkable success that the international community now "had the luxury" to think about the next phase. It was now time to move attention to the recovery phase of the relief operation, which would focus on how to support people in regaining their livelihoods. The United Nations system, joined by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank was conducting a full post-disaster recovery needs assessment and supporting the governments in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Maldives in exploring how to address those needs. Donor conferences and consultations had already taken place in some of those countries on the needs for medium- and long-term recovery.

One area of concern amidst the tremendous generosity in responding to the disaster was that only small pledges had been made for early recovery efforts in the affected countries, he said. While some \$799 million had been pledged against the flash appeal, they covered only 74 per cent of the needs, and most of them were for humanitarian intervention. While some needs were covered more than 100 per cent, the pledging was much lower in some gap areas relating to early recovery. Nevertheless, some \$153 million of pledges were still un-earmarked, and he strongly encouraged donor governments to use those funds to support recovery activities. Many of the organizations involved in the recovery phase, such as the UNDP, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), the International Organization for Migration and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), had received less than half of their requirements.

Most of the 5 million people affected by the tsunami had been involved in the farming and fishing sectors of economy, he added. In Indonesia, those two activities accounted for almost two thirds of the total losses and damages. Restoring production capacity in fisheries and agriculture through supply of fishing gear, repair of boats, unblocking of irrigation canals and distribution of seeds and tools was a key objective for the next three months. That required additional help. The UNDP had appealed for \$175 million in the flash appeal, yet pledges and commitments to that programme amounted to \$58 million, leaving a funding gap of \$117 million. Largely under-funded were such vital activities as recovery of livelihoods, provision of shelter, restoration of critical infrastructure and strengthening local capacities for early recovery.

United Nations agencies were working hard to ensure that HIV prevention, care and treatment efforts were sustained, he said, since disasters could increase the risk of HIV transmission. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was working with the UNDP and others on shelter projects in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The UN-HABITAT had initiated a rapid response programme with focus on immediate shelter and reconstruction recovery. He was also concerned about lower levels of donor support for projects in some of the affected countries, such as the Maldives and Seychelles.

While immediate humanitarian needs were huge, he said that future requirements would be even larger. "Please don't forget the recovery phase", he said. "We need to invest in the ingenuity and strength of local communities, so that the millions of people affected can move toward self-reliance and greater resilience against future hazards." He appealed to Member States to convert pledges into contributions, focus on funding the activities equally in the under-funded countries, and keep pledges flexible so priorities could be set according to need.

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