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Annan convenes emergency meeting to oversee UN tsunami relief operations

30 December 2004 – With the United Nations health agency warning that up to 5 million people in Southeast Asia are without basic services after Sunday's devastating tsunami, Secretary-General Kofi Annan today chaired a top level emergency meeting to oversee what may turn out to be the largest ever UN relief effort for a natural disaster.

"This is an unprecedented, global catastrophe and it requires an unprecedented, global response," Mr. Annan told a [news conference](#) after rushing back to UN Headquarters in New York from an interrupted holiday to convene a session of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) as reports put the death toll at close to 120,000 and still rising, the number of injured at half a million and those displaced at 1 million.

Beyond the emergency appeals for immediate assistance he appealed to the international community to remain committed for the longer term. "We know that the impact will be felt for a long time to come," he said.

Half a billion dollars in assistance have already been pledged or received, as well as contributions in kind in what he called "a good response," and he stressed the "absolutely essential" need for coordination of relief efforts both in the immediate and the longer term.

Emphasizing the UN's coordinating role, he said he saw no conflict between the world body and the Core Group of Australia, India, Japan and the United States, which President George W. Bush has announced will organize relief.

The Secretary-General is scheduled to meet on Friday with US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"Above all, I would like to assure the people of the region that the entire United Nations family stands ready to assist, and we stand behind them," he declared. "We will work with them in every way we can to rebuild their lives, livelihoods and communities devastated by this catastrophe."

After chairing the meeting, which included UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland, other agency heads and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Mr. Annan participated in a video conference with US Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington and the ambassadors of the other Core Group countries. He also met with the Permanent Representatives of the 12 nations most affected by the disaster before conferring with the European Union.

Next week the UN will launch a flash appeal for the first six months of the emergency, which is expected to surpass that held after Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America in 1998, when the \$153 million for the first six months was followed by a mammoth longer-term reconstruction effort undertaken by the UN and the [World Bank](#).

According to figures released by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)), the two largest UN flash appeals to date have been \$1.6 billion for Iraq following last year's war and \$350 million for the earthquake in Bam, Iran, a year ago.

While declining to speculate on the actual amount, Mr. Annan said the immediate and longer-term needs of reconstruction would be in the billions of dollars, including what the devastated nations themselves would muster.

He noted that the UN would be stretched in human resources, financially and technically with all its other humanitarian commitments around the world, and he hoped that the international community would respond to this disaster without decreasing its overall development aid so that it would not be like "robbing Peter to pay Paul."

He did not exclude a later visit to the region when it would not cause a distraction.

Meanwhile the UN World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) said today between 3 million and 5 million people were unable to access the basic requirements needed to stay alive - clean water, adequate shelter, food, sanitation and healthcare.

Among its immediate and longer-term priorities, the agency cited medical assistance for the hundreds of thousands of injured people and ensuring clean water for affected populations as well as sanitation facilities to reduce the risk of outbreaks of such potentially deadly diseases as diarrhoea and dysentery.

Mr. Egeland said WHO had informed him that diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases are on the rise. "We could be in a situation that more children could die from diarrhoea in the next weeks than those who were killed by the [tsunami](#)," he added. "This is always the after-effect of major natural disasters."

The UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)), warning that urgent ecological concerns threatening human health must be addressed, has created a task force to alleviate the impact of the disaster, such as solid and liquid waste, industrial chemicals, sewage treatment and the salinization of drinking water.