

Response of the U.S. Government and the International System to the Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunamis

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Six weeks have passed since a deadly earthquake and tsunamis struck countries in Asia and Africa. The countries and people struck by this disaster are now beginning to turn from the immediate task of saving the lives of family and friends, to the long-term and even more difficult work of rebuilding homes, livelihoods and communities. The best estimates by affected country governments and the UN report more than 161,000 dead in seven countries over two continents, and another 139,000 still missing. Over 1.1 million people are displaced.

The U.S. government, in partnership with the affected countries, the international community, and the United Nations, will continue to provide food, shelter, water and sanitation to those in need. As President Bush said, "The government of the United States is committed to helping the people who suffer. We're committed today and we will be committed tomorrow." Americans have great sympathy and respect for the people of devastated communities, who have come together to search for the living, bury the dead, care for those who have lost families and livelihoods and rebuild their lives.

National and local governments in the countries hit by the tsunami, the multilateral development banks and bilateral donors, including the U.S., are working together to assess medium- and long-term damage and needs. Even in the worst hit areas, such as Aceh and the coastline of Sri Lanka, rehabilitation and reconstruction have begun. Preliminary assessments produced jointly by the tsunami-affected governments, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, USAID and other partners place damage and loss costs at \$4.5 billion in Indonesia and \$1.3 billion in Sri Lanka. While Maldives assessment has not yet been completed, Maldives' own assessment is that \$1.3 billion will be required for tsunami reconstruction. We expect refinements of these studies to be produced in the coming weeks.

To help meet these needs, the Administration is seeking \$950 million to support the rehabilitation and reconstruction of areas devastated by the Indian Ocean Tsunami and to cover the costs of the U.S. government's relief efforts to date. As President Bush said when announcing this request: "From our own experiences, we know that nothing can take away the grief of those affected by tragedy. We also know that Americans have a history of rising to meet great humanitarian challenges and of providing hope to suffering peoples. As men and women across the devastated region begin to rebuild, we offer our sustained compassion and our generosity, and our assurance that America will be there to help." The President and this Administration look forward to working with Congress to provide these funds quickly.

We recognize that the Committee seeks in this hearing to have a preliminary assessment of "lessons learned." The transition period now from relief to reconstruction and recovery provides a useful juncture at which to assess the effectiveness of the immediate response to the tsunami disaster by the U.S. government, as well as other actors. We appreciate this opportunity to share with the Committee some preliminary thoughts. The assessments and recommendations that follow result from informal interagency discussions, information from the State Department's embassies and USAID's missions.

In any disaster, the U.S. must be coordinated internally, as well as with other responders; these include government officials and non-governmental groups in impacted countries and regions, the UN system, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other responding nations. The sheer magnitude of the tsunami presented many challenges to all those who sought to provide assistance -- many of these difficulties were met with remarkable speed and effectiveness. This is a success story, but as in any complex situation, there is also room to assess how things might have been done even better and how they can be improved in the future.

The United States is uniquely equipped and willing to contribute our resources to employ the many tools at our disposal in responding to international crises. The following series of simultaneous actions undertaken by the U.S. -- often in conjunction with other actors -- illustrate our process for responding to the tsunami crisis: (1) taking care of American citizens; (2) coordinating government-wide mechanisms; (3) engaging the international community; and (4) engaging affected countries.

Taking Care of American Citizens: The Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) established within 24 hours of the disaster a consular task force to handle inquiries from American citizens. Over the course of the first week, the Department received over 30,000 inquiries from all over the country and around the world about missing Americans. Of those tens of thousands of initial inquiries, we worked 15,112 inquiries on specific individuals who might have been in harm's way, and nearly all of these cases are resolved. The number of American confirmed dead is currently 18 and the number of presumed deaths is 15. We are hopeful this number will not rise any higher.

This remarkable response was facilitated by CA's standing practice of keeping "fly-away" teams on standby for crisis response. In the tsunami case, given the distance from Washington to the impact zone, CA initially deployed personnel to affected areas from neighboring Asian countries. We then sent in personnel from Washington as well as some from elsewhere who had specific language fluency. As in many crises, consular personnel were frequently assisted by locally resident American citizens who volunteer their services to help fellow citizens through the "warden" program. In this instance, the volunteer wardens were most helpful in getting messages to other Americans to phone home and reassure loved ones that they were okay.

Consular Affairs and embassies report good cooperation overall with local authorities and across Washington agencies to identify Americans who may have been harmed by the disaster. Three groups of issues have emerged that could improve the U.S. government's ability to assist Americans overseas when a disaster strikes:

- **Technology:** Web-based tools, such as on-line inquiry forms, can help supplement telephone queries about missing Americans and improve our ability to rapidly process and cross check information (e.g., with flight manifests) from a variety of sources. CA will be expanding its use of technology along these lines, and sees no statutory impediment to such action in the context of the Privacy Act.
- **Surge Capacity:** While CA was able to respond quickly with fly-away teams, it is worth noting this capacity depends on the overall diplomatic readiness of the Department. We welcome the opportunity to work with Congress to maintain this capacity.
- **International Coordination:** CA maintains regular contact with key allies on crisis management objectives. We all recognize that our most important objective is to have a prompt, effective means of communicating with each other rather than fixed plans. During a crisis, it is essential that we share information on fast-breaking developments and available resources. Our experience during the tsunami reinforced our belief that this type of regular communication leads to effective coordination.

Coordinating Government-wide Mechanisms: Within the first day after the tsunami struck, U.S. Ambassadors and embassy staff, including USAID missions, were on the ground working with national and regional governments to disburse emergency funds, identify relief needs, and provide rapid assistance. When the need for transport became apparent in Indonesia, the U.S. Ambassador was on the phone to Washington urgently requesting helicopters and the first sign of relief that victims saw in many regions was the helicopters of the United States Navy, bringing water, food and medicine to those in need. Within 72 hours after the tsunamis struck, the *USS Bonhomme Richard* and the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit had been turned around from their previous mission and sent steaming toward the Indian Ocean.

- The State Department played a key role in laying the groundwork for our military and USAID's rapid response, including:
- On December 27 the State Department stood up a policy task force, established simultaneously with counterpart task forces at USAID/Response Management Team, the Department of Defense (DOD) and Pacific Command;
- Immediately after the tsunami struck, my colleague, Under Secretary Marc Grossman, called together and led an international "Core Group" that included Australia, Japan, India, Canada, the Netherlands and the UN to coordinate the first stages of the international response. This Core Group ensured one country did not duplicate the efforts of others, identified and filled gaps in the first days and broke logistical bottlenecks. As the UN mobilized and took on a central role in the relief response, the core group passed its coordinating functions to the UN;
- State worked quickly with DOD on contacting host governments to secure status of forces agreements, permission for our military to use foreign airspace and territorial waters to conduct relief operations;
- Embassies worked with local customs authorities to smooth entry of relief goods;
- The State Department task force processed the voluminous tsunami-related information pouring into Washington from the media and from embassies overseas, summarizing and distributing that information to the interagency via twice-daily situation reports; and
- The State task force also compiled and monitored the extensive USG emergency assistance in each affected country and the USG resources available to bring to bear.

The U.S. military and the U.S. Agency for International Development moved quickly and effectively to help those in need. I especially want to acknowledge the outstanding contributions of the U.S. Pacific Command. My colleagues on the panel will supply you with more details on the remarkable things they accomplished to establish the logistical backbone for the entire relief operation and to facilitate the work of the United Nations, NGOs and other donors.

The coordination effort required for dealing with the tsunami was one of the most complex ever attempted by a State Department task force or by the U.S. government. The process worked extremely well especially in light of the magnitude of the tragedy. The task force provided vital insight and guidance that helped to shape the overall U.S. response and ensure coordination of U.S. and international relief efforts.

An initial review of our experience in responding to this disaster also suggested areas where the Administration and Congress can work together to ensure the U.S. has the resources and flexibility needed to speed help to those in need. For example:

- *Mass Casualty Disasters:* This disaster required the U.S. to respond to a mass casualty incident (other than terrorist-related) involving a large number of victims, both American and foreign, in several foreign countries. Although identifying the dead is not a foreign assistance issue, President Bush is seeking to replenish in the supplemental a special State Department account to fund efforts to identify the remains of Americans killed in a natural disaster overseas.
- *Private Donations:* The outpouring of donations from private U.S. individuals and companies to help in a disaster overseas posed new challenges in matching those who can contribute with those in need and coordinating private efforts with national governments and bilateral and multilateral donors.

There was close interaction between U.S. and foreign militaries during the crisis, and foreign militaries played a vital role in providing relief to the people of the region. In that light, it is worth reviewing U.S. capacity to interact with military forces in response to a humanitarian crisis, and to explore ways the U.S. can increase our training and capacity building assistance to foreign militaries for such operations.

The foreign military that was faced with the most extreme tsunami-related challenges was the Indonesian armed forces (TNI). As my DOD colleagues can attest, the cooperation between the TNI and the U.S. military was very good. But we believe it could have been better, and I would therefore like to briefly address the present legislative restriction on IMET for Indonesia.

The Department fully supports justice and accountability for the egregious acts of violence committed against our American citizens in Timika, Indonesia in 2002. The Department considers the protection of Americans abroad one of its most important responsibilities. We will continue to emphasize to the Indonesian Government that resolving this case and ensuring the safety of Americans in general are crucial to our overall relationship.

Our concern is not with the intended purpose of the legislative condition, but with the limitation on flexibility that it represents. The U.S. has many priorities in Indonesia, including strengthening democracy, promoting military reform and enhancing security cooperation, especially against terrorism. IMET is an extremely valuable tool that Congress provides to accomplish these objectives. For that reason Secretary Rice is examining this issues with a view toward working together with Congress to achieve our many critical interests in Indonesia.

Engaging the International Community: The Core Group model discussed above provides several good lessons going forward. First, coordinating donor response in the early stages of a crisis smoothes interactions with authorities in affected regions, maximizing needed assistance while not overwhelming local capacity. Related to this, a clear channel of interaction with the recipient government gives affected regions the opportunity to guide support according to their priorities, which is essential for assistance to be delivered effectively.

Second, including affected countries with extra capacity to help other victims builds regional cooperation and a sense of "ownership" of the relief effort and facilitates good relations with local authorities. For example, the inclusion of India in the core group smoothed the way for excellent military cooperation with India throughout the crisis. India's participation was also seen, properly, as an acknowledgement by the U.S of India's growing international stature, and recognition of its transformation from being an aid recipient to a strong regional donor.

Finally, a flexible framework is important to responding quickly and effectively to a disaster situation. The State Department was able to rapidly pull together this group, which never had a physical meeting and established no bureaucracy in addressing critical issues. The composition of the Core Group was the right formulation to respond to the tsunami crisis. Core Group members were able to reach out quickly without the structural impediments that any kind of permanent structure might have imposed.

In addition to bilateral outreach, the State Department, along with USAID and DOD, coordinate closely on the ground and at the policy level with a range of UN agencies engaged in disaster relief. The UN system directs its policy-level and on-the-ground disaster response primarily through the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). The ERC has a number of UN offices it can utilize to coordinate overall response, in particular the Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). On the ground, OCHA sets up Humanitarian Information Centers (HICs) to coordinate among UN agencies and with the affected countries, bilateral donors, military units and NGOs.

At the same time, independent UN agencies, such as the World Food Program (WFP), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), take on specific coordination and response leads related to their mandates. For example:

- The International Organization for Migration was there in the first days, and with USAID funding, provided the major share of truck transport and logistics for the crucial first few weeks;
- To combat measles in Aceh, where vaccination coverage was less than 50 percent before the tsunami, UNICEF began a measles campaign to vaccinate approximately 575,000 children;
- WHO established health sector meetings and, along with USAID and the U.S. Navy, initiated a series of assessments along Aceh's western coast to determine the health profile and relief needs among the affected population; and
- WFP set up a logistic pipeline for rice and food commodities to Aceh and Meulaboh, and began a system of sea transport to reach areas not accessible by road.

At the policy level, the ERC participated in daily coordination calls of the Core Group. In addition, on the day of the Indian Ocean earthquake, the ERC dispatched teams of experts to help Sri Lanka and the Maldives assess the extent of the crisis. Once the multinational forward hub was established at Utapao, Thailand, the UN also positioned liaison officers there from WFP and the UN Joint Logistics Center (JLC). They worked alongside liaison officers from Thailand and bilateral agencies, including USAID. The HIC was set up quickly to establish coordinating meetings between all actors in the relief operation.

The U.S. experienced good coordination with the UN during the crisis, and the UN role was essential to the success of the overall international response. At the same time, it would have been helpful if the UN had deployed staff more quickly to the region and set up a more robust command and control operation to meet logistic and coordination requirements. The somewhat decentralized system wherein OCHA coordinates some aspects of the UN's operations, while independent UN agencies simultaneously coordinate specific sectors, can lead to bottlenecks and delays.

The Administration does not believe it is necessary to establish a new disaster body separate from the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and the offices it commands. In our preliminary analysis, however, it would be worthwhile to re-examine how the UN conducts disaster planning and response. Some specific ideas might include:

- *Lines of Authority:* Strengthening the ERC's lines of authority would better empower the ERC to manage the UN agencies with disaster relief as part of their mandate.
- *Communication:* Encouraging better communication between UN agencies and offices; institutionalizing mechanisms for coordination in the wake of a disaster that requires an immediate humanitarian response.
- *Streamlining:* Bringing some existing programs, which currently reside in various UN entities, under one existing office or agency instead of a new body. This could save money and improve effectiveness through streamlining, especially if the authority of the ERC were enhanced.

Addressing such reform is currently on the minds of some donors, such as the U.K., which has raised these issues in context of their Presidency of the G-8.

Engaging Affected Countries: The people caught in a disaster are frequently also those who respond most quickly to the immediate needs of those around them. Governments and local authorities in the affected areas also set the priorities and goals for reconstruction and development as rebuilding begins. Thus, one of the most important ways to bolster disaster response capacity is to strengthen the capacity of local and national authorities to prepare for and coordinate their response to disasters.

Across the region hit by the earthquake and tsunamis, neighbors saved lives, brought medical assistance to the injured, and helped each other in heroic fashion. Many local and national governments responded amazingly well, especially given the magnitude of the disaster. For example:

- The governments of India, Malaysia, and Thailand marshaled resources quickly to help their own people and reached out quickly to other affected nations. India, in particular, has benefited from years of USAID funded training and support in emergency and disaster management which has greatly improved their ability to manage disasters on their own;
- The Sri Lankan Air Force, with its limited fleet, flew long hours on relief operations and supported numerous VIP visit requests and aid coordination requests. The Sri Lankan Air Force provided immediate evacuation services to foreign injured in remote parts of the country;
- Many Americans caught in the tsunami, who often showed up at the embassy with only their bathing suits left, were taken in immediately by Sri Lankan families and fed, housed, provided with some basic clothing, and, in some cases, given enough money to get back to Colombo.
- A group of Indonesian students from Java, with no relatives in Aceh, managed to get on a C-130 bound for Aceh to offer their help. Relief organizations quickly utilized them moving supplies.
- Thailand allowed the United States, the United Nations and the international community to use Utapao Air Base in northeast Thailand as a regional hub for humanitarian assistance to the affected areas.

As the United States considers how international capability to respond to disasters can be improved, we need to look first at how to build local disaster response capacity. Our own domestic disaster response model can serve as a reference point. When evaluating U.S. internal disaster response capability, the U.S. General Accounting Office concluded in 1993: "Fewer federal resources are needed to respond to a catastrophic disaster if state and local governments' response capabilities are greater... we emphasized that state and local governments are integral parts of an effective national disaster response system. The success or failure of any changes in the federal role in that system will always be heavily affected by the efforts of state and local responders."

Other countries can apply this same concept to augment their own domestic disaster mitigation and emergency response capacities. Within our current resources, the U.S. can continue to use such mechanisms as:

- *Encouraging countries to review and exercise their disaster response systems:* This will help them to discover ahead of time and prepare for possible problems like bottlenecks in the distribution network.
- *Sharing best practices:* For example, Florida Governor Jeb Bush is discussing with Thailand ways to share Florida's experiences in dealing with the hurricanes that struck Florida last year.
- *Enhancing training for first responders:* In the wake of the Gujarat earthquake that struck India, the U.S. launched and continues to provide first responder training. In Bangladesh, following the typhoon, we helped the country install storm shelters and initiate first responder training. The U.S. can also look to other areas where we have provided extensive training. For example, by the end of 2004, the U.S. had provided, through the Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) program, counterterrorism training to almost 41,000 law enforcement personnel in 148 countries.
- *Sharing technology:* We are working with United Nations agencies and other donor nations to develop an early warning system for natural disasters in the Indian Ocean, and the President's supplemental budget request supports this need. We might also consider compiling and exercising internet-based networks and databases to facilitate coordination in responding to disasters.

The U.S response to the tsunami shows the value of prompt and effective American action, combined with multilateral support for disaster victims. There are a number of areas international disaster response can be improved by streamlining existing mechanisms and, above all, improving the capacity of local authorities to respond to crises. Every disaster presents a unique set of challenges, but by disseminating best response practices, providing training for first responders and ensuring clear lines of communication, the U. S. and the international community can most effectively deliver its vast quantity of existing support.

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