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Briefing on U.S. Preparations for Relief Efforts for Burma

Briefing by USAID Administrator and Director of Foreign Assistance Henrietta H. Fore and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); Director of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance Ky Luu

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: Good morning, everyone. Let me start with a few comments on Burma and the Tropical Cyclone Nargis. It is a tragedy of enormous proportions. We continue to offer our deepest condolences to the people of Burma and to those who've lost loved ones in Tropical Cyclone Nargis. The President made a point that I think needs underscoring. It is that the Burmese regime needs to let international assistance come in to help the Burmese people.

The United States Agency for International Development has allocated \$3.5 – pardon me – \$3.25 million in initial assistance to date. This is initial assistance, let me underline that, for this relief effort. The assistance will be allocated by the USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team, what we call DART. It is currently prepositioned in Bangkok and awaiting permission to enter Burma. We are urgently requesting visas.

The Burmese state media is reporting that the cyclone has killed approximately 23,000 persons with an additional 42,000 that are missing. These figures remain unconfirmed at this time and our experience is that these numbers will rise. Reports of a higher number of deaths, injuries and missing persons only increases our concerns and our desire to provide assistance to those who are in greatest need.

We are all very concerned because there is also torrential rains forecast for this area. According to the UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance, OCHA, the most urgent needs are: plastic sheeting, water purification tablets, cooking sets, mosquito nets, emergency health kits, food, and fuel supplies. Some assistance is starting to get in, but it is a trickle. It is not enough. It needs to have a greater size and a greater speed. So we are urging the Burmese regime to grant full access to the affected areas to international humanitarian relief teams and to nongovernmental organizations so that they can help and provide assistance to those who are most in need.

We are poised and ready to make a significant contribution, but we need a very large coordinated international assistance effort. It is a time when we need that directed by international relief coordinators who have experience in the field. There are many international tragedies and this one needs to be contained at this time. There's a link to the global food crisis; this Irrawaddy River delta region is a major region for the growing of rice, so it has a link in terms of this region, may not be able to provide rice into the world markets.

We encourage Americans who wish to assist the people of Burma to make cash donations to reputable organizations who are currently working on the ground in the disaster region. For information, I suggest going to interaction.org website. Nothing will get there faster than by giving to these nongovernmental organizations and others. The latest information and updates from USAID can be found by visiting the USAID.gov website, but the American people stand ready to help. Thank you.

MR. GALLEGOS: I appreciate that. Thank you. Now, for the rest of the briefing, we have the Director of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance Ky Luu. He will be – he'll be making a brief statement and then he'll be taking questions and answers.

MR. LUU: Thank you. I will just follow up by saying that, as Administrator Fore said, we are committed, we are prepared, we have a DART that is now currently prepositioned in Bangkok. Our DART team leader has been engaged in all of the interagency standing committee briefings that are taking place there. There's been outreach to our NGO partners and to our UN partners.

Again, with the initial contribution of \$3.25 million, it is going to be allocated initially in the following manner: a million dollars has been committed to the American Red Cross. This will go towards the purchase and procurement and distribution of non-food items. We had initially provided \$250,000, which was made available to the embassy. That money was made available to our UN partners, to World Food Program -- to UNHCR, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and to the World Food Program.

We are in discussions with operational partners who are currently on the ground in order to make sure that the funding that could be made available will have an immediate impact. The problem that the entire international community is facing right now is access. What is available in terms of capacity in-country is not adequate to be able to respond to a disaster of this magnitude. So again, we urge the government of – the regime of Burma to open up access to all humanitarian actors. Thank you.

QUESTION: Have you all made a policy decision yet on whether or not you will give more aid if the DART team is not allowed in, or whether it will be okay with you if a UN assessment, some kind of an independent team can go in and check? Is your – are additional contributions dependent on the DART team going in or not?

MR. LUU: The manner with which the U.S. Government provides humanitarian assistance is that it's needs-based. What the DART does for us is it allows us an operational platform, an operational presence in the affected region in order to coordinate, in order to communicate with partners to best effectively target our assistance. What the DART team does in a chaotic environment is help us to be able to identify what the needs are. So, it expedites and it facilitates our funding stream. It's not a policy issue. So therefore, if we were getting information from reliable operational partners that we could verify, again, that's how we are able to make and base our funding decisions. It's based upon needs, it's based upon evidence at the field level.

QUESTION: Well – so, yes or no?

MR. LUU: Well, if the UNDAC teams and other teams were able to come in, and we know these partners and we work with them and they're able to identify what the gaps are, and these gaps are not being met, we are prepared to be able to provide additional assistance. So, the DART team really is made up of these disaster experts and they coordinate and they work with our other colleagues.

QUESTION: Right, but I guess – I think you just answered it, but I want to make sure. The bottom line is, though, you'd like to have the DART go in, but if it doesn't go in, you're not going to cut off – are you --

MR. LUU: That's correct. The bottom line is the DART's presence helps us make informed decisions and it helps us be able to get the resource out quicker. Without the DART on the ground or without other operational partners, it's very difficult at this point in time to tell you exactly what the conditions are on the ground: how many people are impacted, what are the needs. I mean, we know generically in a typical response what needs to take place; however, on a disaster of this magnitude, in terms of being able to gauge what the infrastructure is, how best to be able to bring in relief supplies, that information has not been made available yet.

QUESTION: Right. And is it still the case that you haven't heard back? They haven't rejected the visas, but they just haven't responded? Is that --

MR. LUU: It's my understanding that as of morning calls with post and others, that we have not heard back one way or another at this stage.

QUESTION: What about the -- there was a U.S. cargo plane, a C-130, that they thought was going to be allowed in. I think in Thailand they were saying, oh, that's going to be allowed in. And then I guess it wasn't. Do you have any update on that, where that plane is or what's happening?

MR. LUU: I don't have an update on it. I know that our colleagues within DOD and post and State and others are discussing this option, as we're discussing any options in terms of being able to bring in relief supplies from any donor nation. I think that's the difficulty that we're faced right now. And the reality is that one flight will make some sort of a difference, in terms of testing the logistics and the ability to be able to move commodities out, but we need a decision made soon. I mean, you know, we're approaching almost a week here when the cyclone hit the impacted areas. And we need to get commodities in as quickly as possible and established in-country logistics in order to move commodities out.

QUESTION: But have they started letting -- there was a report they had started letting UN planes land. Is that right, and can you, perhaps, then just funnel your assistance through UN planes? Would that be --

MR. LUU: It's my understanding that there have been four World Food Program flights that have been approved and cleared. I don't know what the status in terms of when their arrival is. We have heard that, for example, back on Monday, a flight from Thailand had landed with relief supplies. Again, they were not allowed to be able to provide for actual relief teams. And the point here is that you can bring in commodities, but if they're not reaching the impacted areas, if they're not available in terms of warehouse space and logistics, forklifts capacity and trucks and helicopters to be able to bring it out, we may be inundated and create a logjam. So it's -- that's why the DART team and the UNDAC team and other disaster experts, it's very important to have them on the ground right now, not just to carry out assessments, but to establish the infrastructure and order the mechanics of moving supplies out.

QUESTION: Is there a need to position teams around -- on the border not far from the countries to -- if people get -- to come to you if you cannot get there? Is it possible?

MR. LUU: I think that we're all looking at options right now. I can't say that in terms of a cross-border operation at this point in time is something that is high on our priority because the reality is, if you look at where they're positioned, that's really not something that's realistic. So the point being is that we've got to be able to get our team in to be able to get access to the largest impacted population.

QUESTION: Can you give us -- you had mentioned that it's been almost a week since the storm hit. Is there kind of a deadline or a real kind of red line area that you see coming up where the aid really needs to get there before we start seeing more casualties from disease, hunger -- after the storm?

MR. LUU: It's difficult to put a clear timeline on this. But clearly, when you're talking about, let's say disasters that are water-related -- the cyclones, the floods -- what you will find right off the bat is, let's say perhaps, high levels of immediate mortality rates. But you don't see a lot of those who are injured by this walking around. So in that context, with an immediate emergency health intervention, we have some time. However, there are secondary health illnesses -- cholera epidemics and others, water-related borne diseases that we have some time. But the reality is on the health portfolio, I would say maybe it could be two to three weeks. Again, I'd have to check in with our health experts on this.

But what is immediately needed right now is access to clean water, and that is immediate. What is absolutely immediate right now is access to temporary shelter. So these sorts of non-food items, the water sanitization, we don't have time to wait on this. This has to go in. And though some of our operational partners had some in-country stocks, it was more on the level of perhaps for 10,000 beneficiaries. And what we're hearing from others is that, you know, you're talking about an overall population in the five states of about 24 million people. There could be anywhere from 1.5 million who will need immediate assistance. So what is available in-country right now is inadequate to be able to deal with the catastrophe.

QUESTION: There's been some talk about -- I mean, I know this is more of a political decision, but in terms of, like, what you can do in terms of getting aid in, there's been some talk about just kind of forcing the aid through, doing airlifts, you know, if the government won't give the visas and let you get on the ground. Would that help you in any way, like, even if you could do, like, targeted kind of pin-drop food drops, things like that? Is that something that's being considered? Would that help you, or it's really not the kind of infrastructure that you would need to get the aid where it needs to be?

MR. LUU: Anything that might have a positive impact is being looked at and is being discussed. Air drops -- again, here you have to have the in-country infrastructure in order to be able to distribute the supplies. You have to be able to communicate to beneficiaries that air drops are occurring. And therefore, it's not the most efficient manner in terms of providing relief assistance and, in the end, it may create more harm than anything else. So our point is that, yes, we're looking at it, but the immediate needs are for open access for the current existing operational partners and for the regime in order to open up to provide for additional relief workers to get on the ground.

QUESTION: Just a quick follow-up. What is -- what do they -- is the regime telling you in terms of why they're not letting you in?

MR. LUU: I'd have to defer that to my State Department colleagues. What I do know is that, you know, on the humanitarian side, this is what we're planning on in our discussions with our NGO partners and our UN colleagues.

QUESTION: Are you in touch with any kind of similar counterparts in Burma on the government side? I mean, does the government even have any kind of agency like USAID, kind of -- obviously, it wouldn't be as big a scope, but are you talking kind of to your aid counterparts on the ground there?

MR. LUU: The closest and probably the most viable option right now is the local Red Cross, and we are in discussions with the International Federation of the Red Crescent Movement in Geneva as well as our American Red Cross colleagues in terms of assessing their capacity and how to get resources to them. That's the -- at least from our humanitarian perspective, that's the open line of communications that we're currently having.

QUESTION: Well, if they don't allow U.S. flights, are you in touch with the UN, working with the UN, or India or China, with the neighboring countries there, or do you have any other options at the last if they don't allow because more and more people will die of hunger and, as you said, many other diseases? You have any other forceful option other than this?

MR. LUU: Well, I think if you look at who has access, I think we're all very similarly situated here in terms of our ability to be able to not just bring in relief supplies but bring in staff. And there are coordination meetings that are taking place at the -- in Bangkok, and that does include both UN and other donor colleagues, and this is being discussed.

As far as other discussions, that is taking place. Again, you'd have to -- I'd have to defer to our State Department colleagues to be able to tell you in terms of at what level and what's being discussed.

QUESTION: Have you, by any chance, heard anything about your colleague Jon Brause's visit to North Korea for discussions on the U.S.'s plan for food aid to North Korea?

MR. LUU: I have not been in discussions with Jon since this occurred, so I'd have to -- again, we can get back to you with regard to that.

MR. GALLEGOS: There'll be a briefing at 1 o'clock this afternoon.

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: A group of senators today called for USAID to evaluate which organizations on the ground might be best able to overcome the political obstacles to deliver aid in what -- one way, either USAID or -- obviously, USAID -- and try to break the logjam that way. Is there anything going on in that regard?

MR. LUU: We know who the current existing operational partners are and we are in discussions with them right now in terms of being able to provide them with assistance. So that, as I said, is the quickest avenue that we have to have an impact without having the DART team or without having a large UNDAC team on the ground.

That said, we're hoping that other operational partners are able to get access, because the reality is that those existing infrastructure and staff that they have in country are limited. They've been limited in terms of their ability for movement. They've been limited in terms of their ability to get out to the impacted area. They've been limited in their ability to be able to bring in additional resources. So on the one hand, we are reaching out to the existing operational partners in country. We're also reaching out to other partners who may not have an existing operations, but if the conditions are such that they opened up, they are able to come in and ramp up programs relatively quickly.

QUESTION: What are the NGOs you are working with who have access to Burma?

MR. LUU: For example, World Vision is on the ground. Save the Children is an operational partner that's currently there. Pact is on the ground. Our UN colleagues, for example, World Food Program, UNHCR, UNICEF. That's just a short list. But again, it is a short list, and even then they don't have enough staff in country to be able to do what they need to do.

QUESTION: Have you guys -- what have you sort of learned or what are you studying from the tsunami response as far as how you're operating? I remember during the tsunami it was the U.S., Australia, Japan. I think India created this tsunami core group that was pretty unified in how they were responding and they didn't go through the UN. They just kind of went. Is that something you're studying as far as a response for this, as kind of setting up some real body between the countries surrounding Burma as far as how to respond?

MR. LUU: We're looking at close coordination with other donor countries, but I think that the biggest difference here is not only in terms of the size and the scope -- I mean, if you go back to the tsunami here, it impacted, I think, 13 countries. But within hours, within days of the tsunami, the governments had very much opened up access. If you look at the situation in Indonesia, where -- within Banda Aceh up at that point, there weren't many operational partners, whether it was UN or NGOs. And within two days, they did allow access and that access is the key.

We have to be able to come in and we have to verify what the conditions are in order to coordinate. Right now, the coordination that's taking place is, yes, we have some countries that are pledging resources, we have other countries that are noting that they have standby capacity. But unless and until we have some real, credible field-driven assessments, we're in a coordination phase outside of the country and that really does not have an immediate impact on the victims of the cyclone.

QUESTION: What's the status of the U.S. military ships that were on maneuvers and are they being diverted? I know it'd take three or four days, I guess, to get there, but --

MR. LUU: I'd have to defer the specifics -- details on that, to our DOD colleagues.

QUESTION: Can I go back to your answer to a question earlier about the -- on the air drop idea? Are you -- are you saying that it is being -- it is being considered, that -- drops of food and other supplies without the government's permission?

MR. LUU: Everything within the law is being considered at this point in time.

QUESTION: Is that legal?

MR. LUU: Pardon me?

QUESTION: Is that legal?

MR. LUU: To be able to drop without --

QUESTION: Yeah.

MR. LUU: I'd have to -- again, you know, whether you look at the UN mandate, I think they're -- the French are looking at and others. I can't tell you what the legal ramifications are. I can say that if we were given permission to go in, that we would do so. If, let's say, we were only given permission to be able to drop off food, again, that is something that we would do.

QUESTION: Are you talking about the responsibility to protect (inaudible)?

MR. LUU: That's correct.

QUESTION: So it is being -- has that been done before?

MR. LUU: The responsibility to protect -- I think it's a kind of a recent idea here. What I was talking about in terms of air drops would be on the mechanics, all we could talk about in terms of planning. In terms of access and what that means, in terms of the legal and international ramifications, again, I'd have to defer to our State Department colleagues. But in terms of planning for it and what it might look like and what the resources would be required and how we might be able to plan for it in-country, as I said, any and all options are being planned. What, actually, we'll be able to implement will be driven by many things, first of all, in terms of access.

QUESTION: Yeah, but are you aware of this being -- of that kind of thing being done previously without permission of the host government?

MR. LUU: You know, again, I'd have to look at it, but it's my understanding that that was what was utilized with regard to Kosovo. But again, I'd have to go back and defer to others who are much more well-versed on this. I can only really discuss in terms of the mechanics and the operations in terms of what it might look like.

QUESTION: But on Kosovo, you're talking about without the permission of the Serb Government, which -- I mean, there was a dispute, you know, there was a --

MR. LUU: I believe that that's where it was first, I mean, discussed in the international platform. Again, I can only discuss in terms of what's being looked at for this

current implementation plan and strategy and we are planning the operations.

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: Do you think this is all politics from the military dictatorship, sir?

MR. LUU: Pardon me?

QUESTION: Is this politics, do you think, military dictatorship is playing?

MR. LUU: I don't understand the question.

QUESTION: Do you think the military dictators here are playing any kind of politics?

MR. LUU: Again, you know, I can only talk and address the humanitarian aspects.

QUESTION: Because of the U.S. (inaudible)?

MR. LUU: We would hope that politics do not come into play. We would hope that with the size and scale of this crisis, that the focus is on the victims and the focus is on being able to allow access and allow our operational partners to be able to deliver life-saving assistance.

MR. GALLEGOS: Okay. We have time for one more.

QUESTION: Yeah. You said a few minutes ago that some of your operational partners had some stocks and you said only enough on the order of 10,000, were you talking about stocks of water, stocks of food, or stocks of what?

MR. LUU: For example, UNHCR had stocks of blankets, stocks of water, stocks of plastic sheeting. Again, for all of them, it was on the magnitude of enough for 10,000 beneficiaries. So it is absolutely urgent for us to be able to not only provide funding for them to restock, but the ability for them to actually bring in the relief commodities. But bringing in commodities is just one component of this. You have to have the basic infrastructure to move it out.

QUESTION: Is that the universe of the stuff there that you know about? I mean, is that the most? I mean, enough there for --

MR. LUU: That's what we know of at this point in time, yes.

QUESTION: But what about like, the Red Cross? They had something there, didn't they?

MR. LUU: They did have some supplies which have already been distributed. And I believe that the IFRC has released an appeal for about 6 million Swiss francs for the restocking of those supplies. And, you know, the point, as we're saying, is that there's not enough stocks, staff or capacity in country at this point in time to deal with this catastrophe.

MR. GALLEGOS: All right. Thank you, guys.

QUESTION: I'm sorry, one more question. Well, why not just give everything through the UN and allow the UN to distribute everything? Why does it have to go through U.S. transport planes or U.S. assets? Why not give everything to the UN and have them -- you know -- through the World Food Program, through all their agencies, seeing as how their planes are being allowed in now?

MR. LUU: Well, not all their planes are being allowed in.

QUESTION: Well, there are several at this point.

MR. LUU: They have received, what we've been told, permission for four flights and for food. They are similarly situated, as are our other colleagues, in terms of being able to bring in staff. As I said here, the UNDAC team, they were only allowed to grant visas for four staff, so -- the point being is if there's a large infrastructure that we can support, we will look at that option. But the point is that it shouldn't be narrowed in scope. Everybody has to become involved and we hope and urge that the regime will allow the access to take place as soon as possible.

MR. GALLEGOS: Thank you.

MR. LUU: Thank you.

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