



U.S. Relief Efforts For Burma

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MR. CASEY: Okay, good afternoon. I think I can actually say good afternoon now. Appreciate you guys being back here for briefing three (inaudible). I certainly know there's been a lot of continued conversation about cyclone relief efforts in Burma and wanted to have an opportunity for Ky Luu to come and I think do what is probably his third or fourth appearance with you all to update you on the situation in terms of both U.S. relief and the kinds of things we're seeing and being able to gather on the ground about how that overall relief effort is going.

So, Ky, do you want to come up here?

MR. LUU: Thank you. It's been 35 days since the cyclone hit Burma. And according to the United Nations, approximately 54 percent of the affected population have received some sort of humanitarian assistance. That means that approximately a million people have gone without adequate shelter, water, food, and access to healthcare for over a month now.

So access continues to be a problem, and we urge the Burmese authority to allow experienced relief workers additional access not only into Burma but into the affected areas. There are far too many people in need of assistance and far too few relief workers to help them.

To date, the United States Agency for International Development, USAID, has provided a little over \$27.6 million in emergency assistance. This combined with \$7.5 million from the Department of Defense brings the total U.S. Government contribution to \$35.1 million. Moreover, the funding that USAID has provided to our 13 NGO and UN partners in ten different sectors will reach a targeted 1.6 million beneficiaries. Again, we are limited in reach due to access, and that access is due to not only the relief workers but the types and amount of equipment, like light trucks and boats needed to be able to carry commodities, experienced practitioners and technical specialists to be able to carry out programs.

So let me stop there, and I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.

QUESTION: Have you – I noticed this picture here which appears to show a relatively unobstructed (inaudible) of this – the label on the box USAID is – that's being delivered from a boat, I guess. What is your information about how much of this assistance is actually getting to or has gotten to people in need, how much of the U.S. assistance that is being provided?

MR. LUU: With regard to the commodities, as you're well aware, we have been flying C-130s into Burma now for a few weeks. We have flown in to date 116 flights. As of May 16th, all of the USAID commodities have been consigned directly to NGO and UN partners, and we are hearing reports back immediately from them, even on the day when they receive the commodities at the airport, that it's being distributed out to the affected region. Much-needed commodities like plastic sheeting, like jerry cans, like hygiene kits, are having an immediate impact. We're now also moving in higher-end commodities like water purification units which have the capacity to provide enough water for 10,000 people per day. We're bringing in zodiac boats in order to help relief workers move around the region.

So what we're hearing back from the UN and the NGOs who are having access to the delta region that the commodities are actually reaching the people and they're having an immediate impact.

QUESTION: The 35 million that – contributions that includes the DOD contribution – the DOD contribution includes like just the cost of having the Navy carriers, you know, in place for a certain period of time? Is that – that's what – even though nothing actually got to the intended recipient?

MR. LUU: Well, I'd have to get an exact accounting from the Department of Defense, but my understanding is that the 7.5 million obviously does include all of the expenses related to the personnel and the equipment that was in the region. But it also includes the C-130 flights, the 116 flights that have flown in much-needed commodities as well as some DOD-purchased – locally purchased commodities. So that 7.5 contribution is not just about the *Essex*. Another offer of assistance that has not been accepted by the Burmese, but it's actually had, obviously, an effect in terms of the ongoing relief efforts.

QUESTION: There have been reports that they've been closing – the government there has been closing cyclone relief camps. What can you tell us about your knowledge about that? And do you think that, you know, they're – what's your perception of how much freedom they're allowing the humanitarian aid workers, in general, to move around?

MR. LUU: Mm-hmm. With regard to the camp closures and perhaps forced relocation, we have heard these reports from our NGO partners and the UN. Again, they're not -- at this point in time, it's my understanding it's not been verified mainly because we don't have access to many of these camps. And this has been raised through the ASEAN mechanism and UN and NGO partners as being unacceptable if, indeed, it is occurring.

Again, it's troubling. We know that as of May 20th, that the United Nations had reported approximately 260,000 people were in about 239 camps. So it comes out to a question about access for teams to be able to go in. And if, indeed, these camps are not being closed out, we would hope that the authorities allow additional access for us to verify that this is not happening. But if it is, it is a troubling sign because you're forcing people to go back into areas that may not have the ability for international relief workers to have access to deliver and sustain programs.

QUESTION: Do you think that the initial fears that you had when you couldn't get in about disease, malnutrition, you know, the clean water type of things, do you think you've averted that kind of looming disaster that you initially was – were worried about if you wouldn't get in? I mean, is the worst behind them or --

MR. LUU: It's tough to say at this point, because we are closely monitoring the UN health cluster reports. And to date, it has not reported out any sort of large outbreaks that we had been concerned with. Again, we don't have access to a large portion of the population. This is a very diverse area and rural areas. The ability for the limited amount of the relief workers who have access to the delta to be able to move from the places where they're currently providing assistance into new areas, it's going to take a while. So I think that if you view what the surveillance network that's been set up, though it has not revealed this sort of worst-case scenario, again, we are still concerned, because we just don't know.

QUESTION: Are you considering any further political moves to try to address the access issue with a – with a regime there through ASEAN? And can you comment on

how effective you think ASEAN has been or not been in getting any kind of movement on this question?

MR. LUU: Mm-hmm. We are working all avenues here in terms of pushing for greater access and not just for our own DART team, but really for the international community to have access. That has been a constant in terms of our strategy from day one. With regard to the ASEAN mechanism, we support this mechanism. I think that, really, since the tsunami, we have been providing technical support and we look forward to this 200-plus team that has been deployed out to the region as of today. I believe it's been made up of ASEAN technical staff as well as UN and government authorities to be able to carry out the necessary assessments. And we stand prepared and ready to be able to act and then support their findings.

QUESTION: Are you – is the DART team still in Bangkok?

MR. LUU: The DART team is still in Bangkok. They are --

QUESTION: That's nice for them.

MR. LUU: They have been closely, obviously, working with our international community, which most of the cluster coordination meetings were taking place in Bangkok. That said, as greater access is being allowed into Rangoon, the coordination meetings are taking place now in Rangoon. So it is something that we have to review in terms of the ability to maintain a large DART presence in Bangkok, if they cannot serve their intended purpose.

QUESTION: When – when were they supposed to – when was their – they were there, even before the site – the storm, right, because – who are training something?

MR. LUU: Well, we have, through the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, the USAID, we have a regional office in Bangkok. So our DART leader, Bill Berger, is actually one of the regional advisors in Bangkok. So he was there and other disaster managers already were on the ground in Bangkok. And they were supplemented by additional staff at headquarters in terms of the different technical functions.

You know, to date, as has been reported, Bill is in Rangoon, and he was part of the U.S. delegation to the pledging conference. He was issued a 30-day single-entry visa, so he still remains in country. He was allowed last week, and I believe prior to the pledging conference, the ability to be able to do a fly-around. And he actually was able to just return from a two-day assessment out to the delta region. On the ground, he overnights in Bogalay and Labutta townships. And he's looking forward to be able to return back out to the region and continue to carry out assessments.

QUESTION: Well, how long were the – when – you know, yesterday the DOD said they will -- you know, the – its ships were going to leave. How long are you going to keep the DART team in Bangkok, you know, hoping for visas?

MR. LUU: We'll keep them in Bangkok, the full team, as long as there is still – they serve an intent purpose. To date, they're still coordinating and having a dialogue with our partners to be able to continue to provide funding. You know, it's not as if they're sitting in Bangkok not doing anything. As I noted, that -- there's been about \$27.6 million programmed through USAID. That's being programmed to the DART. They are collecting information from partners. But again here, we would hope, as we have hoped now for several weeks, that there will be movement with regard to access for our DART team.

QUESTION: What is the earliest they may leave Bangkok or the earliest you may fold up that tent (inaudible)?

MR. LUU: Mm-hmm. We may look towards reducing the full complement of the DART team. There may still be a need for logisticians to be in Bangkok to be able to continue to support the C-130 flights or to be able to support the UN air bridge that is ongoing. There will still be a need for some of these functions that would still be performed out of Bangkok.

That said, some of the technical functions, whether they're water sanitation specialists or health and others, their value added is to be on the ground. And we, as I said, are over – approaching a month now of having them in Bangkok. If, after a review of proposals and support to international partners, that they're still not able to get in, I think we will have to revisit their redeployment back. Clearly, we are supporting many other disasters globally and they are needed elsewhere as well.

QUESTION: But I mean, do you sense that as you've gotten on the ground in small measure, that there have been more aid coming in -- Bill Berger was allowed in. Do you sense any kind of openness from the government that they see that the aid is coming in, it's not an effort to, I don't know, overthrow the regime or whatever? And -- but do you sense, like an -- do you have an optimism that things might get a little bit better and you may be able to get more people in? Or are you kind of close to losing hope or patience or a little of both?

MR. LUU: Yeah. I would say we're frustrated. You know, we're -- it's 35 days into this and yet we're still hearing from our NGO partners that there are bureaucratic impediments to their ability to be able to move from Rangoon into the delta areas. It comes out to -- in terms of staff and equipment to be able to deliver assistance. At this point in time, as I noted, close to 50 percent of the population have not received humanitarian assistance. In order to reach new populations, it will require additional resources in order to maintain the level of assistance, where we have had access, it's overstretching what is currently in country. So that means that we would again urge authorities to remove restrictions in terms of those relief workers who are already in country, but also to issue additional visas to experienced relief workers who can come in to be able to expand the current operation.

QUESTION: I'm sorry. When you say that 50 percent of the population has had no assistance, do you mean that since the cyclone, no one has visited them, no one has given them anything? It's as if the cyclone kind of kind of hit yesterday and -- I mean, it's -- there's -- no one's been there.

MR. LUU: We can't verify that. What we can verify would be the amount of commodities that the international community as a whole has brought into the pipeline. What has been reported out by the UN and the NGOs, who have access in terms of what they're doing, the number, as I noted, is 54 percent that the United Nations has reported. That said, there may be under-reporting. The government authorities have moved assistance in. We know that there have been private Burmese efforts that are not being reported.

Again, what we are saying here is that there's a large amount of areas, and rural areas, especially, where we have not been able to get a definitive answer as to the state of this population. And 35 days into it, we are concerned about their continued vulnerability. If we are given greater access and be able to verify what's happening, that number will go up. So again, it's -- if they are receiving assistance, we would hope that the authorities would be more open in terms of sharing where they have reached and what they have provided. That would help us as a whole here in terms of coordinating this response.

QUESTION: Speaking of these private efforts, do you know anything about this relatively well-known or very famous comedian in Burma who was detained or arrested today, who was involved in these private relief efforts?

MR. LUU: I'm not aware.

QUESTION: Just in general, going back to Elise's earlier question, is this situation under control now or is it still crisis?

MR. LUU: It depends on what has happened, or is happening, with the 46 percent of the population that we don't know about. Again, this goes -- leads into the discussion in terms of health surveillance. We would hope that greater access occurs so that information can be compiled and analyzed. And if there's additional need, we, the U.S. Government and our colleagues in the international community, stand prepared to do more. But again, it's difficult to be able to define what we don't know.

QUESTION: Right. But if there were to have been the kind of disease outbreak, cholera, that kind of think, wouldn't they have -- wouldn't you have expected to see -- already have evidence of that kind of thing?

MR. LUU: Not necessarily. If you look at the map of the delta region, you know, these are very dispersed geographical areas and it's very difficult to access them; usually you have to take small boats to go from one rural region to the next. So there are isolated pockets here where perhaps nobody's visited. We just don't know. And I think that that is what scares us. It's difficult to plan. It's difficult to be able to come out and determine what the next steps are when we don't have credible access and information to this population.

QUESTION: If there is a -- if there's basically a team or teams of 200 ASEAN and UN people going in for this assessment, what could the U.S. DART team actually add to that? I mean, wouldn't they -- is there some specialty that you have that they don't?

MR. LUU: We have been providing the ASEAN members with technical support and in terms of disaster management. And we -- again, as I said, are looking forward to the results of their assessment. We'll support this initiative. We have provided them to date with some initial funding in terms of startup administrative costs for the ASEAN in -- staff in Rangoon.

What the DART team brings is a little over 40 years of disaster management know-how and best practices. And when the ASEAN team came into Rangoon, they did sit down with Bill Berger, our DART leader, who had the opportunity to be able to at least brief them up in terms of what he knew and what he saw. But again, you know, the DART Team is part of an overall effort. And as much as we want to get the DART team in, we would like other international teams to be able to be afforded the same accommodation.

QUESTION: Are there any Americans on this team that you said is going in? It's -- I think you said about 200 people? It's an ASEAN team. And when are they going in?

MR. LUU: They're already in. It's made up of the ASEAN states and also there are, I believe, members from 18 (inaudible) ministries within the government. And then there are also UN staff who have been deployed. And it's my understanding that the UN staff are made up of international staff. And I'm not exactly sure what the exact makeup of that is.

QUESTION: But they're largely an assessment, you know -- you said you were looking forward to their assessment.

MR. LUU: That's correct.

QUESTION: Just on the death toll and casualty toll that the Burmese authorities have given, do you have reason to doubt it? Does it appear to be accurate -- 130,000 dead and missing?

MR. LUU: I think that's the number that the international community as a whole is looking at. The numbers have remained at that level for a while now. But I think that the point here is we need to almost move beyond numbers and try to urge for how we can provide assistance to the people who continue to not have access, perhaps to international assistance. And it really does come down to a time-sensitive issue here. We need it to be done now and we need it to be done immediately.

QUESTION: Do you think the government has undermined its hold on power? I mean, could there be a popular backlash either now or eventually against it for the way it's handled this?

MR. LUU: I can only talk about what the humanitarian needs are on the ground right now.

QUESTION: You haven't seen any signs of -- from the people just in -- any access, any comments you've heard from people, Burmese people in general, about what the government has done?

MR. LUU: The comments that we hear from our NGO partners are really focused on in terms of delivery of humanitarian assistance.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. LUU: Thanks.

2008/462

 [BACK TO TOP](#)

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