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USAID Official Luu on U.S. Assistance Efforts in Burma United States delivers first relief commodities, says OFDA director

(begin transcript)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Office of the Spokesman
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ON-THE-RECORD BRIEFING

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)
Director of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance Ky Luu

May 12, 2008
Washington, D.C.

MR. GALLEGOS: Good morning, everyone. I appreciate your attendance. Today we have Ky Luu, USAID's Director of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. He'll be speaking about our work and attempts to help Burma.

MR. LUU: Thank you. Good morning. I am prepared to make just a brief statement and then I'm happy to answer any questions you may have. Today, USAID Administrator Henrietta Fore and Admiral Timothy Keating, who is the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, delivered the first U.S. Government relief commodities in to Burma onboard a U.S. C-130. The supplies included 8,300 bottles of water, 1,350 blankets, and 10,800 insecticide-treated bed nets, which will help as many as 30,000 people.

In addition to the commodities that were delivered today, the U.S. Government is prepared to provide an additional \$13 million in support to the UN World Food Program. This would consist of food and other support to the logistics infrastructure, which would help the international community as a whole, which brings to date our cash assistance for the victims of Burma up to \$16.25 million.

Let me stop there and I'm -- be happy to answer any questions you may have.

QUESTION: Just briefly, to change the subject, I'm wondering about aid to China at this point, and with the earthquake there -- if there are any plans for that.

MR. LUU: We are monitoring the situation closely. I think you saw that the President released a statement this morning that said that the U.S. Government is prepared to provide assistance, if asked. As far as what is available, we're looking at any instrument that we have with regard to our disaster managers. The U.S. Government has standby search-and-rescue capacity, working with our partners at Fairfax County and also LA County. We're prepared to provide assistance to NGO partners and other operational partners who already may be in country. We're prepared to deploy Disaster Assistance Response Teams, or DART. Again, if asked -- I know that our Ambassador and other colleagues at post are working very closely with their counterparts -- and the moment that there is a request that's forthcoming, we are prepared to do what we can.

QUESTION: So then I would assume there hasn't been a request yet?

MR. LUU: Not yet.

QUESTION: Can we -- on Burma? What -- when that plane landed and the aid was -- or the commodities were offloaded, where -- who took possession of them?

MR. LUU: The government authorities took possession of the commodities. While on the ground, the -- Administrator Fore and Admiral Keating witnessed helicopters

carrying the U.S. cargo bound for Bogalay township. One of the rationale here is that in country right now, the government authorities are the ones with the airlift asset capacity. The reality is, in order to move supplies from the tarmac out to the impacted areas, we do need this lift capacity. And we're working through all avenues right now to make sure that supplies reach the intended victims as quickly as possible.

QUESTION: And --

QUESTION: Burmese helicopters, you mean --

MR. LUU: Yes.

QUESTION: And the -- but there was -- they didn't, like, paint over the AID or whatever the label --

MR. LUU: What we -- what was witnessed was that it was offloaded directly from the C-130s into the helicopters.

QUESTION: Okay. And that's okay with you?

MR. LUU: Pardon me?

QUESTION: That's okay with you guys?

MR. LUU: We will do -- again, we're looking for all avenues here in terms of supporting the international community, the UN partners, the NGOs. And we're looking at the government authorities as well, if they are able to move our commodities and we can verify that it's reaching the intended victims.

Right now, this is a very good start in terms of bringing in relief commodities. We have heard that there's been approval by the Burmese for an additional two flights to take place tomorrow. There will be, again, relief commodities from the U.S. Agency for International Development to be moved through by the U.S. C-130s. And onboard these flights, we'll include our DART team leader Bill Berger to be working, hopefully, with the counterparts to make sure that the commodities are being taken to the most impacted areas.

In these areas as well, for example, where the commodities went, and this shipment in Bogalay township, we do have NGOs partners on the ground; for example, Médecins Sans Frontières, Pact, Action Contre la Faim. So the point here is to reach out to those NGO partners to verify that the commodities did reach the Bogalay township. And that's really where we are.

I think the point to stress here is that we are urging the authorities to allow not only our Disaster Assistance Response Team, which has been in Thailand now for over a week, but to really allow all the disaster experts from the international community. The commodities that we were able to bring in today, the commodities that other UN colleagues and NGO colleagues are bringing in, represent a small fraction of what is needed and, therefore, we would urge that the authorities allow additional commodities to come in country. But on the backend side there, we do need additional in-country capacity, whether that be helicopters, whether that be NGO and UN relief workers, to actually take the commodities out to the impacted areas and to provide to the victims.

QUESTION: All right. First of all, do you have a breakdown of what will be on the two C-130s going in tomorrow?

And second, are you concerned that China, now distracted by the earthquake, will not be putting the requisite pressure on the junta to help advance that goal you just described of letting more people in?

MR. LUU: With regard to the flights tomorrow, we would have plastic sheeting, jerry cans on the flight. We would have additional mosquito-treated bed nets that came out. I don't have at my disposal right now the exact packing list, but it's representative in terms of what would be immediately needed.

QUESTION: Food as well?

MR. LUU: No, there would be no food on this flight.

QUESTION: And on the China issue?

MR. LUU: The China issue, I'd have to defer to my State colleagues.

QUESTION: So these DART teams that are going in tomorrow will do the same thing that happened today with Henrietta Fore and others; they'll just watch the goods be lifted?

MR. LUU: That's correct. It's not a DART team. Actually, on the flight today are DART team leader was part of the -- was on that flight as well. And therefore, the expectation and the hope would be that this is the beginning of opening up access and -- for this DART team leader to be part of these flights, at least the two that have been approved for tomorrow.

QUESTION: Does that mean that they have actually -- that they've granted them a visa?

MR. LUU: No. At this point in time, they -- what is being accepted is our commodities. And obviously, the people onboard, in terms of delivering the commodities, are coming out.

QUESTION: So they were allowed to fly in with the plane and then leave with the plane?

MR. LUU: That's correct.

QUESTION: They weren't allowed to leave the -- what -- it's the main airport?

MR. LUU: That's correct. At this point in time --

QUESTION: They're not allowed to leave the airport?

MR. LUU: Pardon me?

QUESTION: They're not allowed to leave the airport or the tarmac?

MR. LUU: That -- that is under discussion at this point in time.

QUESTION: Who is discussing --

QUESTION: Is Henrietta Fore still there? I mean, she came in and left, right?

MR. LUU: Administrator Fore is currently in Bangkok right now, but she is due to depart tomorrow morning. She has to come back here to -- I believe she has to testify on the Hill on Wednesday on food security.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) high-level discussions with the Burmese about giving more access to the helpers, to -- giving more visas?

MR. LUU: That has been the message from day one and, you know, we have, as reported out, opened up all channels in terms of discussing. I'm not privy to the details on this, but I know that that was part of the message that was carried forward by USAID Administrator Fore and Admiral Keating to open up access, to issue additional visas, and to bring in additional supplies.

QUESTION: And who did they give that message to?

MR. LUU: There was a high-level Burmese delegation that met our delegation at the airport.

QUESTION: How much confidence do you have that this stuff will get through to the right people? I mean, the U.S. Government, more broadly, doesn't have a lot of confidence in any promises made by these people. Why -- how much do you have that the victims, the people in need, are going to get this?

MR. LUU: I think we have to stay optimistic on this. What I was told -- and I -- before I came here, I was on the phone with our DART team leader. There was a press conference right after this flight where Administrator Fore and Admiral Keating spoke. And afterwards, some of our NGO colleagues had approached our DART team leader, who had said that even if some of the commodities couldn't be distributed directly by them, they felt that anything that we could do to be able to put in commodities in the pipeline would have a benefit. Again, here, this was the first flight. There will be two additional flights going in tomorrow. And we have to stay optimistic, support the in-country team, and hope that the commodities will be able to reach the beneficiaries.

QUESTION: Well, if they don't, I mean, if there's no evidence that the -- if the -- who is it, MSF, ACF and Pact, the people on the ground don't see this stuff being

distributed, will you revisit the idea?

MR. LUU: Well, you know, the flight today was the first USG commodities that were brought in. But we have already programmed, as I said, \$3.25 million and that money went to NGO partners, that went to the UN. And as I said, we're prepared to commit an additional \$13 million today, which brings total assistance up to 16.25. And that is going to the operational partners in country. So, you know, I wouldn't be too fixated in terms of this one flight. It is part of an overall relief effort.

In addition to trying to provide commodities through our military flights, we're also in discussions with our NGO partners to perhaps provide them with direct commodities and have them bring it in through commercial access. So we are looking at and discussing all avenues in order to both support the in-country operational partners, both by providing assistance and also by interjecting much-needed commodities.

QUESTION: Who is in this high-level Burmese delegation that came out to the airport? And who did you say was in your delegation? You said Admiral Keating and who else?

MR. LUU: USAID Administrator Fore.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. LUU: Our DART team leader Bill Berger is there. There is a complete list here. I think we can get that to you in terms of who with – within the Burmese delegation and also the entire list in terms of the USG representatives.

QUESTION: Is the DART team leader still in country in Burma or did he go back to Thailand as well?

MR. LUU: There – the – all of the – well, the flight has returned. They're back in Bangkok now.

QUESTION: How long were they actually on the ground?

MR. LUU: I believe that they were on the ground for approximately two hours.

QUESTION: And the answer on the visas is still no answer or have they – are they saying no?

MR. LUU: At this point in time, it's under discussion.

QUESTION: So they haven't – they haven't been rejected yet?

MR. LUU: We had received word last week that the government would accept our commodities but not accept disaster experts. We're hoping that with this flight, with our DART team leader, with Admiral Keating, with USAID Administrator Fore, that we can open up that dialogue and continue to press for the DART team and – as well as the international community. I think, obviously, we want to get our DART team leader and our DART team in, but we need to get the UN in there, we need to get other NGO partners in there as well. So we're pressing for the authorities really to be able to open up and issue visas for the humanitarian community as a whole.

QUESTION: Are you still preparing for all other possibilities, including air drops? Or is it something you don't prepare anymore?

MR. LUU: The – we're looking at avenues here, as I said here, in terms of supporting the UN, supporting our NGO partners, in terms of bringing relief commodities. And as I noted previously, air drops are not a good option.

QUESTION: What is your latest assessment for the death toll? Last week, we had heard it could go up to 100,000, based on NGO estimates. Is that still the case?

MR. LUU: OCHA is still releasing numbers anywhere from 60,000 up to, I believe, 101,000. And I believe that the government's numbers are still right around 23,000 confirmed death. Again, whether it's 23,000 or 100,000 deaths, this is an alarming, large catastrophe. What we are concerned right now is how to be able to reach the 1.5 million that are in need of assistance, and that's our focus.

QUESTION: What do you know about negotiations to get the commodities through and whether or not there was any Chinese involvement?

MR. LUU: The – our U.S. flights?

QUESTION: Mm-hmm.

MR. LUU: This was -- my understanding was that this was coordinated from our Chargé in Rangoon, as well as our Ambassador in Bangkok, and, obviously, our colleagues at DOD. Whomever else may have been involved, I'm not privy to that.

QUESTION: What's your assessment of the continued impact on the disaster region of this lack of willingness to grant visas -- I mean, on a human level?

MR. LUU: On a human level, it is a disaster no matter how you want to quantify it. If -- the figures here that there are 1.5 million people in need of immediate assistance. You've seen the releases from the various UN partners and NGO partners in terms of what stocks they had available in country. The ability for commodities to enter -- access is one issue. But even if access were opened up tomorrow, the basic infrastructure in terms of the ability to forklift, to move commodities and offload them, right now, most of it's being done by hand. This is not efficient. If you were able to bring in flights, most likely they would be stacked up at the tarmac. We need the disaster experts and -- who have capacity to be able to deliver the assistance. And this has to be done as soon as possible.

QUESTION: There have been instances in the past where governments, oppressive or otherwise, have taken advantage of donations, contributions like the ones that you are making. Is there any concern that because you don't have any oversight at all over how these -- how this stuff is being distributed, that it's not going to go to the right people?

MR. LUU: Well, there's an absolute concern. We are providing assistance on behalf of the American people; we want to make sure that the U.S. taxpayer dollars are being used and tracked appropriately. Again, what we're trying to do here is react, on the one hand, to the immediate humanitarian imperative. On the other hand, we do want to make sure to be able to verify and track these commodities.

So this is the first flight that came in there. We are going to track it. And you know, it's difficult for me to tell you right now what's going to happen in the next upcoming days.

QUESTION: When is it expected to actually arrive in -- in other words, if it was going to Bogalay --

MR. LUU: Yeah, that -- the --

QUESTION: -- it should have arrived already.

MR. LUU: It should have arrived already. Yes.

QUESTION: Have you heard anything? Has it been --

MR. LUU: I need to go back and check on that.

QUESTION: Is it showing up in markets for sale?

MR. LUU: I can't answer that. I would --

QUESTION: Well, do you expect to hear something overnight?






MR. LUU: I would expect to hear as soon as possible, yes.

MR. GALLEGOS: All right. I want to thank you all.

(end transcript)

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