

Disasters: UNDP Responds With Rapid Support Teams

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UN's rapid response to help countries battered by deadly disasters across Asia

Bangkok, 5 October, 2009— UN Development Programme Administrator Helen Clark said today that in reaction to the widespread disasters that struck Asia and the Pacific last week, the United Nations is responding with rapid support teams in Bhutan, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, the Philippines, Samoa and Tonga to support governments helping millions of people hit by a relentless barrage of tropical storms, earthquakes and tsunamis.

Speaking from Bangkok where she has arrived for a series of meetings, Helen Clark said that “Within hours after the catastrophes hit, UN agencies and non-governmental organizations began working in support of national authorities to respond to the immediate humanitarian needs in these countries. UNDP is now preparing to support countries’ plans for longer-term recovery after waters recede and rubble is cleared.”

Typhoon Parma reached the far north of the Philippines over the weekend in the province of Cagayan. This was after Typhoon Ketsana swept through the Philippines a week ago, inundating Manila and affecting more than 3.1 million people. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which is leading the coordination of immediate relief efforts throughout the region, says that nearly 870,000 people are in more than 720 evacuation shelters. Relief efforts were slowed by the strong winds of approaching Typhoon Parma.

Three powerful earthquakes that measured 7.6, 6.2 and 6.8 on the Richter scale rocked the Indonesian island of Sumatra on 30 September and 1 October. The confirmed death toll of 603 is expected to rise significantly. Thousands are trapped and feared dead in the collapsed buildings in Padang , Sumatra’s provincial capital. Rescue workers continue to dig through rubble. A nine-member UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team was deployed to Sumatra.

Food, tents and emergency shelter, medical supplies, hygiene kits, petrol, generators, heavy equipment, water and sanitation assistance, education and post-traumatic counselling have been identified as priority needs.

Last week, an earthquake of 8.3 magnitude generated a tsunami wave that struck American Samoa , Western Samoa and the small northern island of Niutopotapu in Tonga . More than 120 are now confirmed dead. The waves destroyed homes and all public infrastructure including sea walls, hospitals, schools, roads and tourist resorts in some areas. In Tonga, two of the three villages on the affected island of Niutopotapu have been completely destroyed with an estimated 800 people without homes. There is no potable water left on the island.

In Samoa, the Government declared a “State of Disaster”. Doctors and humanitarian aid workers from Australia and New Zealand arrived over the weekend. UNDP has made available an initial emergency grant of US \$100,000 to support coordination efforts, a

needs assessment and an early recovery plan. An UNDAC team is now in Samoa . Senior UN experts are arriving in Tonga to propose early recovery plans as humanitarian assistance is deployed.

The Government of the Philippines estimates that at least 73,000 people stranded on rooftops and houses were rescued through national government efforts. Relief operations to provide for needs of the displaced continue. In response to the request for international assistance, UN agencies are planning to launch a Flash Appeal. A seven-member UNDAC team and specialists for communications, disaster response and ICT from other agencies were deployed last week. UNDP sent a disaster risk reduction expert to support all assessments and assist with plans for early recovery needs.

After wreaking havoc in the Philippines, Typhoon Ketsana moved into Viet Nam . But with warning of the impending storm, approximately 200,000 people were evacuated by national emergency services.

“Three days may have been a small window of opportunity, but it was enough time to save thousands of lives in Vietnam,” said UNDP’s Helen Clark, who also chairs the UN Development Group. “Early warning saves lives. With the increasing impact of climate change, this area of our work will need to grow in order to help those most vulnerable to disasters,” she said.

Unexpected floods have wreaked havoc in South India. Even the remote mountainous country of Bhutan was not spared from disaster. An earthquake of 6.3 on the Richter scale hit the eastern part of the country nearly two weeks ago. The Government has reported 12 deaths. Nearly 43,500 homes, 89 schools and more than 115 government offices and 400 monasteries were damaged. A joint World Bank and UN damage assessment has begun in two affected districts in Bhutan.

The UN is doing its utmost to support all disaster-struck countries deal with these emergencies.