



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

UNHCR Regional Office, Canberra

Media Update, 6 January 2005

UNHCR's Tsunami Response

UNHCR is mounting a major response in Sri Lanka -- where we have worked for nearly two decades -- and in Indonesia's battered Aceh province. It is unprecedented for UNHCR to take such a large and active role in natural disaster response - our mandate is for refugees fleeing persecution and violence. But the enormity of this crisis demands that all of us contribute resources and expertise, so the High Commissioner has taken this exceptional decision to do everything we can as part of the UN response.

UNHCR is focusing on shelter, non-food relief, logistics and distribution in a multi-million dollar relief operation for tsunami victims in the Indonesian province of Aceh and Sri Lanka. Details of both operations and the specific resources needed are expected to be released later today (6 Jan) as part of the joint U.N. appeal. But initial UNHCR estimates place the cost of the refugee agency's operation for both countries at over US\$75 million for six months. Good coordination will be the key, and UNHCR is working closely with the UN coordinating agency, OCHA, other UN agencies, governments and NGOs in the region.

Latest statistics

In Sri Lanka, official reports indicate that the death toll has risen to 30,229 people with 835,029 (212,319 families) displaced and living temporarily in 751 temporary accommodation centres. 15,683 persons were injured and 3,858 persons have been reported missing.

In Indonesia, the death toll in Aceh and North Sumatra is an estimated 94,100 people, with another 1,400 estimated missing. The number of displaced people is estimated at 314,605 people.

Response in Sri Lanka

- The day after the tsunami, UNHCR opened its warehouses in Sri Lanka and began distributing everything we had in our stockpiles - plastic sheeting, cooking sets and clothing for 100,000 people. With seven offices and 113 staff in Sri Lanka, we are the largest operational UN agency on the island so we've already got a good network in place. We've long had a presence in the conflict-affected north as well and have been doing distributions there, too.
- Before the tsunami, we cared for 390,000 internally displaced people and returned refugees in Sri Lanka. Now we estimate there are over 800,000 who are displaced.
- The tens of thousands of items distributed to date include: plastic sheeting, ropes, mats, plate and cups, saris, sarongs, towels, t-shirts.
- We are rapidly replenishing our stockpiles and bolstering our distribution network. We are flying in additional supplies from our global stockpiles in Copenhagen and elsewhere. This includes five huge portable warehouses.
- UNHCR is taking the lead in coordinating the shelter sector of the relief operation with NGOs and other UN agencies.

Indonesia

- In Indonesia yesterday, an UN inter-agency mission organised by UNHCR and WFP began a two-day helicopter survey of areas along the devastated west coast of Sumatra, where the soft earth had previously prevented helicopters from landing in many places. We face huge logistical challenges in Aceh, where infrastructure has been devastated.
- UNHCR will focus on providing shelter, particularly in the remote and inaccessible regions in the west. We are looking at the possibility of using both helicopters and barges to do this. First priority is to get emergency shelter materials and other non-food basics to those living in the open. Next we'll get them shelter kits so they can begin rebuilding and repairing their homes. (UNHCR will provide some 35,000 shelter kits to some 175,000 beneficiaries in Aceh/Sumatra.)
- We began a massive 400-tonne airlift to Indonesia from our stockpiles of emergency supplies in Denmark on 1 January, with four further flights from Dubai, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Frankfurt in this first phase now completed. The airlift included 2,000 10-person tents, 100,000 blankets, 20,000 plastic sheets, 20,000 cooking sets, 20,000 jerry cans and seven crates of UNHCR telecommunications equipment.
- We have an advance team on the ground in Indonesia's Aceh province and in Medan, on the eastern side of the island. Most of our supplies are being flown to Medan, then driven across the island to affected areas in the west.
- Earlier this week, UNHCR experts in public health, water and sanitation, shelter and communications arrived in Jakarta to join the UNHCR team that has already established a presence in Aceh's provincial capital of Banda Aceh, where they are collaborating with other agencies on the distribution of relief supplies and emergency services. We're also bringing UNHCR staff, vehicles and other equipment from elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago, including West Timor.

How you can help?

To help UNHCR provide emergency rehabilitation assistance to tsunami victims in Sri Lanka and Aceh, visit www.unhcr.ch or www.unrefugees.org.au

\$114 will provide a tent for a family of five people

\$142 will buy an emergency survival kit

UNHCR Tsunami Emergency Media Contacts:

New Zealand & Australia:

UNHCR Regional Office Canberra: 02 6120 1104, 0409 501 355

Australia for UNHCR: 02 9262 5377, 0403 325 377

Sri Lanka:

Sat phone: +88 216 511 28 524;

+94 11 777 260 825;

+93 11 777 377 112

Indonesia:

UNHCR Jakarta/Aceh:

: +62 21 391 2888/+62 21 391 2929

62 (0) 812 103 9659 (mobile)

UNHCR Headquarters, Geneva

Media Relations: +41 22 739 8502

+41 22 739 8816, +41 79 217 3108 (mobile)

+41 22 739 8575, +41 79 250 8410 (mobile)

UNHCR is also helping Tsunami victims in Somalia. For information visit www.unhcr.ch/news