



UNHCR

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

UNHCR
United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees
2a Kazbegi Ave., 380060
Tbilisi, Georgia
Tel.: +995 32 250080
Fax: +995 32 441301
Email: GEOTB@unhcr.ch
www.unhcr.ch

PRESS RELEASE

UNHCR PLANNING SIX-MONTH TSUNAMI RESPONSE OPERATION

GENEVA – In an unprecedented response to a natural disaster, the U.N. refugee agency said Monday it is planning a six-month, multi-million dollar emergency relief operation for tsunami victims in the Indonesian province of Aceh and in Sri Lanka.

UNHCR, whose mandate is to protect, assist and find solutions for refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, said it had taken the exceptional decision to provide its resources and operational expertise to help natural disaster victims because of the immensity of the crisis and because Secretary-General Kofi Annan had asked all U.N. agencies to participate. The agency is already working on the ground in both Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

“This is indeed a very special situation,” U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers said Monday. “The dimensions of this disaster are enormous and it makes sense for an operational agency with UNHCR’s experience to be available as part of the United Nations international relief effort. We all have a duty to help.”

UNHCR has five decades of experience in responding to refugee emergencies worldwide and has worked for years in both Sri Lanka and Indonesia. While it has sometimes made its global emergency stockpiles available to others involved in disaster response, it has never before taken such a large and active operational role in responding to a natural disaster.

The agency is planning a multi-million dollar relief operation for tsunami victims in the Indonesian province of Aceh and in Sri Lanka. It will focus on shelter, non-food relief, and logistics and distribution. Details of both operations and the specific resources needed are expected to be released later in the week as part of a joint U.N. appeal. But initial UNHCR estimates place the cost of the refugee agency’s operation for both countries in the vicinity of US\$56 million for six months.

The UNHCR operation in tsunami-ravaged northwest Sumatra will require the most financial support because of the huge logistical challenges there and the need to rapidly build operations from scratch. UNHCR advance teams are already on the ground there and the agency began on Sunday a massive airlift to Indonesia of 400 tonnes of emergency relief supplies from its global stockpiles in Denmark and Dubai. All of those supplies should be in the region by Tuesday. A 14-member UNHCR emergency team is also being deployed.

UNHCR will focus on providing shelter in Indonesia, particularly in the remote and inaccessible areas of the west coast of Sumatra, where it is exploring the possibility of using helicopters and barges to ferry shelter materials and other supplies. An assessment mission by a U.N. team is scheduled for Tuesday. The UNHCR airlift currently underway is bringing emergency shelter materials for 100,000 people. Once immediate shelter needs are met, temporary shelter kits will be distributed for displaced people to start rebuilding their own homes.

UNHCR is already the largest operational U.N. agency in Sri Lanka, where it has been working with hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people for nearly 20 years. Its current operation will be expanded to cope with the huge new demands created by the tsunami crisis. UNHCR estimates that some 800,000 people can now be considered displaced in Sri Lanka -- a figure which includes some 390,000 conflict-displaced people and returning refugees UNHCR assisted prior to the tsunami. UNHCR is expanding its logistical and warehouse capacity throughout the island to facilitate delivery of relief items to the needy populations, including in the war-affected area.

In a round-the-clock relief operation that began the day after the Dec. 26 tsunami, UNHCR has now nearly depleted its central stockpile in Colombo. The agency’s 113 staff in seven field offices around the island are distributing the last of the supplies of plastic sheeting, cooking sets and clothing for 20,000



families (100,000 people). Another airlift is currently being planned to rapidly transport to Colombo additional relief supplies from UNHCR's central warehouse in Copenhagen as well as regional stockpiles. Incoming aid will include five huge portable warehouses, 20,000 plastic sheets and 20,000 cooking sets.

Any individual or organisation wishing to make a contribution to address this catastrophe can make a cash donation by credit card online on web-site: www.unhcr.ch

UNHCR Office in Tbilisi, Georgia
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Contact Person: Tamara Gogoshidze

Assistant to UNHCR Representative in Georgia

Tel: (995 32) 250080/81

2a, Kazbegi Ave.,