



TSUNAMI DISASTER STIRS MASSIVE AID EFFORT

January 5, 2005

As the United States ramps up relief efforts in South Asian countries devastated by the Dec. 26 earthquake and tsunami, U.S. aid organizations say an intensive Internet fund-raising effort has helped raise at least \$163 million.

Secretary of State Colin Powell and President Bush's brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, toured the countries worst hit by the disaster to assess how best to help the survivors rebuild their homes and lives.

The Bush administration has increased its aid pledge from \$35 million to \$350 million and stationed an aircraft carrier off Indonesia, the country hardest hit by the disaster, so helicopters can ferry food and water.

President Bush also asked former President Bill Clinton and his father, former President George Bush, to head a fund-raising drive, urging Americans to donate.

Speaking from Indonesia, Secretary Powell said American aid for Asia's tsunami victims shows the world that the United States is a caring country, perhaps alleviating some of the discontent that fuels terrorism.

"We believe it is in the best interest of those countries and it's in our best interest and it dries up those pools of dissatisfaction which might give rise to terrorist activity," he said.

Aid organizations inundated with donations

Aid agencies said they were surprised by the speed at which donations came in.

"We've already seen virtually an unprecedented overwhelming response from the American public," said Mary McClymont, president of InterAction, an umbrella organization that includes more than 55 American-based humanitarian and development groups.

Stacy Palmer, the editor of the Chronicle of Philanthropy, a newspaper of the nonprofit world, gave some of the credit to the Internet.

"If you went to weather.com, it said here's how you can give. You went to amazon.com before you bought a book there was something that said here's how we can give," she said.

Palmer added that it was safe to give online as long as the site is secure so your personal information cannot be seen or stolen by others, and that the Web site itself is legitimate; sometimes scam artists use similar but slightly different names or domain names.

"It's just like with online shopping or anything else. You have to be careful and be a smart donor," she said.

Palmer said donors should consider whether the organizations they give to are effective by asking "Do you have a track record? Have you ever done this kind of work before? Do you know how to provide relief in a way that really helps people and doesn't just get in the way?"

Cash is the best way to help

Fund-raisers said many Americans were offering clothes, food and water, but that cash is much easier to work with.

"It is the transportation costs that go up if you have to deliver these goods. The humanitarians on the ground know exactly what the need is. So that they with the cash can go out and buy local products, local commodities, and we want to help the economies of these countries," explained InterAction's McClymont.

"It's also more culturally appropriate, you know, if you're able to buy the goods right in the country," she added.

The total amount of money donated to the South Asia disaster is expected to grow, but not reach the level raised after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, when Americans gave \$2.3 billion.

Keeping track of aid and fulfilling promises

Some organizations have already received all the tsunami dollars they can use. Doctors Without Borders, a medical relief agency founded in 1971 by a group of French doctors, is telling donors that it has received a "sufficient" amount of money for its South Asia relief efforts.

The organization, which has raised about \$20 million for tsunami victims, now asks donors to give to the general fund, which goes to less publicized humanitarian crises like the situation in Africa's Darfur region of Sudan.

The group's decision reflects caution among relief agencies about honoring donor requests.

Agencies well remember the public anger directed at the American Red Cross in November 2001 when it announced that because it was receiving so many donations, it would use some money for other causes not directly related to the terrorist attacks. The agency quickly reversed course and pledged to use the "Liberty Fund" money for the victims.

CARE USA, another major relief agency, said it is unlikely to call off donations for tsunami victims because the money could go toward longer-term projects, like rebuilding schools, health centers and community centers.

-- Compiled for NewsHour Extra by Leah Clapman