

Press Briefing with Henrietta H. Fore Administrator, USAID and Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance

Humanitarian Assistance to Georgia

Via Telephone from Tbilisi, Georgia
August 21, 2008

MODERATOR: Okay, Administrator Fore, we've done a roll call. We have the full gamut with you today, and they're ready for your opening statement.

ADMINISTRATOR HENRIETTA FORE: Good. Thank you very much, Jeff and hello, everyone.

We've had a very good and very interesting day here in Tbilisi, Georgia. And we've had a chance to visit an IDP center for internally displaced persons in the old forestry center here in Tbilisi. About 237 of the IDPs were housed in the complex we visited.

And we visited with a number of families, but one in particular, headed by a very eloquent mother who was the head of the family, Lucia. She spoke about how she left her village and she spoke about how she brought her family out, her son and daughter, and how they have -

QUESTION: Speak louder, please. We can't hear.

MS. FORE: - been hoping to have the family reunited. And they are now all at the IDP center, but their village has been burned, a village named - (inaudible). And 40 other families from their village have gathered in this IDP center.

It is a rough center in that there are not showers and many of the toilets do not work, but they are safe. They have bedding, sleeping bags, toiletries and things that have been furnished by the United States. And that is good news. They are asking for more things for children and for babies, so it was a place that had hope but has many, many needs.

And then we moved to a hospital, which is a good success story for the United States. We've been helping on development assistance for this hospital, helping with Emory University School of Medicine, to train and exchange doctors and nurses and administrators.

They've also had a field hospital in Gori. They have not yet lost any patients. They've been treating civilians and soldiers alike. And they are setting up emergency medical network for Georgia. And then later in the day, we met with the president, the prime minister and the ministers of finance, health and economic development and agriculture.

And there are two main messages that I've been sending today, in addition to the one that you all know, which is that we as the United States government stand as friends, with a vigorous and ongoing humanitarian assistance to the people and the government of Georgia, and that we are working as a team: diplomacy, development and defense.

And I called on Russia for allowing the IDPs to return home. This is the time for them to be able to return home. And second, I called for full access to all humanitarian teams as well as for the assessment teams for both humanitarian as well as reconstruction assistance.

You know, we have more teams coming in, government. Reuben Jeffery from the Department of State and Doug Menarchik, the assistant administrator in USAID, will be joining that team.

So we are looking forward to more of our teams assessing the activities on the ground. Today, there have been U.N. agencies and NGOs that have been distributing assistance in Gori. It is just one day, so the first day has gone well.

MODERATOR: I think we're going to open now for some questions. If you could, identify yourself, your organization. And we'll proceed as long as we can, for the 15 minute time limit that we've placed on this call. Thank you.

First reporter question.

QUESTION: Hello. Can you hear me?

MODERATOR: There we go.

QUESTION: Oh, okay. Great. Hi, this is Betsy Pisik with The Washington Times.

I wonder, Madam Fore, could you tell us a little bit about what you actually saw there in terms of, were you able to see a Russian presence? Was there evidence of fighting? I mean, can you describe a little bit of the situation?

MS. FORE: From here in Tbilisi, I did not see a Russian presence.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS. FORE: And we did not see fighting.

What we did see were both civilian and military casualties in the hospitals. And most of the casualties, as I believe you've been hearing, are head wounds particularly from shrapnel and other pieces that have injured civilians and soldiers.

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: This is Kirit Radia with ABC News. I just had a question, Madam Administrator.

If you could tell us, last time we spoke, we asked you about the Russians opening up humanitarian corridors. And at the time, it didn't seem like they were. But there are some indications they are opening them up now.

Can you give us an update on that and then also an update on if there are any U.S. efforts to get either U.S. personnel or U.S. aid into South Ossetia? Thank you very much.

MS. FORE: There have been the reports that I mentioned today, U.N. agencies and NGOs who have been in Gori today. And they've been distributing food as well as hiking boots and other things that the people of Gori need. And that has gone well today, without any distribution problems that we have heard about. And so it is important for that to continue.

This is a large and complex challenge for internally displaced persons, to have access to food and water and bedding and mattresses and all of the things that you need for a good quality of life. We have non-governmental partners who are operating in South Ossetia. And for all of them, it is the distribution of humanitarian assistance that is difficult. So distribution is a challenge.

QUESTION: Are there any plans to send either U.S. personnel or U.S.-provided aid to South Ossetia?

MS. FORE: We have aid going through implementing partners, so through other agencies. But at this time, we are not sending any of our American team into South Ossetia.

QUESTION: And then - (inaudible) - the other part of my question about whether the Russians are opening up the corridors, is that because they will not let you in? Or is that a U.S. decision that you don't want to go in? And then again, on the corridors. Thank you.

MS. FORE: We are not allowed in to South Ossetia. And Gori - the access today for Gori is still challenging. We heard from the United Nations agencies - there's a full complement here - as well as their experience with the NGOs. It is still - there are many roadblocks. We are calling for full access to all humanitarian teams and that is very important.

Humanitarian work, to be able to save lives, to be able to keep families together, needs access, access to world,

nongovernmental and U.N. teams, as well as to these assessment teams that we are - that we have assembled, the DART teams and the reconstruction teams.

QUESTION: Madam Administrator, this is - (inaudible) - from CNN Turk. I have a quick question about the ships that will be heading towards Poti. We understand the German and the Spanish aid ships have already passed the Turkish straits and the U.S. ships would probably pass through tomorrow or - tomorrow later. Will you have access to the Port of Poti? And do you think the aid will be flowing through Poti?

And the second one is quickly, if you can, elaborate if there is running water or if there are any plans of U.S. providing running water or certain - services of providing water for the city of Tbilisi and the cities around it.

MS. FORE: On the ships, we are also having the same information that you do on the United States ships, that this weekend, perhaps Sunday - I know that there is still discussion about Batumi and Poti. And we will try for there to be ships that would land in either or both ports.

And in terms of water and sanitation, this is of particular interest because it's important that there be potable water but also that there be a way that latrines and the sanitation needs for people, especially the IDPs - so this has been a focus for both United Nations agencies as well as for the U.S. assistance teams. And we are working in both of these areas.

In Tbilisi, it is at many of the centers with IDPs, but since we're also working in the hospitals we are ensuring that the hospitals are in - are in good shape, for these water and sanitation facilities.

QUESTION: Hello. This Jane - (inaudible) - with Chicago Jewish News. Can you hear me?

MS. FORE: Yes.

QUESTION: I was wondering what's the duration for how long do you expect to continue providing aid?

MS. FORE: Well, to date, we've provided a little over \$10.7 million worth of humanitarian relief. What we've heard today from all of our partners is that there is still a very important need for hygiene kits and water containers, blankets, mattresses, pillows, bed sheets, kitchen sets, because being able to cook your own food is important. So we anticipate staying as long as there is need and helping to set up the economy, because it's very important that the economy begins to take on its normal aspects, but it depends on our ability to do full assessment throughout Georgia.

QUESTION: If people want to make contributions directly, how do they contact you?

MS. FORE: The best way to do it is to go to the website. There is a www.cidi.org and there's www.reliefweb.int. And these are both good information for anyone who would like to help the people of Georgia. We are always encouraging people to make monetary contributions to reputable humanitarian organizations that work in Georgia. Nothing gets there faster and can help more at this time.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS. FORE: You're welcome.

MODERATOR: Okay, we have time for a couple more questions. Then we're going to wrap up.

QUESTION: Ms. Fore, Charlie - (inaudible) - from CNN, can you hear me?

MS. FORE: I can, Charlie.

QUESTION: I know that the assessment is still under way, but at this preliminary stage, how many people are we talking about in need of humanitarian assistance?

MS. FORE: Well, the estimate that we have right now is nearly 130,000 newly displaced people in Georgia.

And so let us assume that most of these people need some form of assistance from shelter to water to food to things like mattresses and pillows and bed sheets. So they are in need. We are finding that it is - there's a wide disparity in

living conditions at the IDP collective centers. And as a result, it's going to be important to bring up the basic level of living at many of these centers. Some of them are schools and they have facilities for water and cooking facilities and bathrooms. Others are not, and they have not been set up that way.

And as we know, the school system is coming quickly, so that children need to return to school, for most of them, within the next month. And as a result, it becomes increasingly important that these Georgian IDPs be able to return home so that they can begin to earn their normal livelihoods and place their children in school.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MODERATOR: I think we have time for one more question. Going once, going twice.

Madam Administrator, thank you very much today. And we're sorry we kept you up so late, but the message is so important. And have a safe trip home.

STAFF: And you all, thank you for calling in.

MS. FORE: Thanks a lot. (Break) - tell you how things came when I went into Georgia, so glad to talk to all of you. Thank you.

MODERATOR: All - if anybody has any additional questions, just call the USAID press office, please.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Thank you. Keep up the good work.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Who was that?

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