

Admiral Thomas B. Fargo, USN
Commander, U. S. Pacific Command
Special Defense Department Briefing
on U.S. Relief Efforts for Tsunami Victims
Pentagon, Washington D.C.
January 4, 2005

ADM FARGO: Good afternoon.

Ivan, how are you? Good to see you.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'd like to provide just a brief synopsis, if I may, of our efforts in support of Operation [Unified] Assistance, and then I'll be happy to take your questions.

It's fair to say that the Southeast Asia earthquake and the follow-on tsunami on Sunday, the 26th of December, will necessitate one of the most complex humanitarian disaster-relief efforts of recent history. Striking nearly all shores of the Indian Ocean, millions of people, multiple countries faced unimaginable destruction in a brief period of time.

At the U.S. Pacific Command, we began a planning effort in the first 24 hours of this catastrophe. On Monday we communicated directly with our ambassadors in the region and the senior military leaders in several of the worst-hit countries. Our goal was to understand how our capacity and supply could best be used to help regional neighbors in need. A joint task force, under the command of Lieutenant General Rusty Blackman, was ordered stood up at the same point in time.

Damage assessment teams were ordered to Indonesia and to Thailand and Sri Lanka within 48 hours to let us know the dimension of this catastrophe, and at the same time provide the immediate relief that we knew was going to be required, like water and medical aid. To the greatest degree possible, we wanted to begin moving resources simultaneously with our assessments.

We ordered the Abraham Lincoln Carrier Group to proceed at best speed from Hong Kong toward Indonesia. We then ordered the USS Bonhomme Richard Expeditionary Group from an area that was just south of Guam toward Indonesia also at best speed. We knew from our recent disaster response in the Philippines, and our 1991 response to cyclonic flooding in Bangladesh -- which was Operation Sea Angel -- that immediate needs were going to be drinking water and shelter and food and medical support. A key lesson from all of these events was the value of helicopter vertical lift.

The ability to rapidly apply needed capabilities in response to a crisis reflects well, I believe, on our force posture and investment in the Asian Pacific Region. The speed with which we will bring forces, and have brought forces such as the carrier and expeditionary groups, as well as P-3s and C-130s to bear for immediate employment, is critical in a region characterized by vast distances of time and space.

As I mentioned earlier, we stood up initially Joint Task Force 536, now redesignated as Combined Support Force, or CSF -- and that's led, once again, by Lieutenant General Rusty Blackman. And this was important to manage the magnitude of this crisis operation. Our Combined Support Force will help coordinate the contributions of our military, other nations and other organizations.

Our strong ally Thailand quickly responded to our request to allow us to center General Blackman's operations in Utapao, thus strengthening the capacity of U.S. forces providing relief in the region. From that hub location, he's ensuring close coordination of all elements on the ground and at sea while synchronizing multiple efforts in the region to support nations as they best see fit.

It's important to point out that this likely could not have happened without our ongoing security cooperation efforts designed to strengthen our alliance with Thailand and all the countries of this region and the fact that we've been able to build enduring habits of cooperation over a long period of time.

We should all be proud of our service members as well as the other governmental and nongovernmental organizations, all of who are responding quickly with great energy and compassion. They're putting an extraordinary humanitarian face on a particularly large undertaking.

There's an important point that I'd like to reiterate. We see our job as one of assistance. Many organizations -- international, national, governmental and nongovernmental -- have joined together to help. We've coordinated closely with the State Department and with USAID, and we're in support to the host nation, who's responsible for its citizens. So U.S. Pacific Command and the Combined Support Force bring unique capacity quickly to support these dedicated volunteers. All of us are working together to lend a hand, mindful that we do so in a way that meets the request of our host governments, and we join with many to provide assistance and relief.

It's hard for us to comprehend the devastation suffered by so many. And over the next days, weeks and months, we'll push forward to provide aid and comfort, responding with the team of dedicated countries and organizations, and we'll continuously improve our efforts as we go.

Thank you. And now I'll be happy to take your questions. Please?

Q: Admiral, how many Marines from the Bonhomme Richard group are going to be going ashore? And where are they going to do that? And what will their duties be?

ADM FARGO: I think it's hard to say what the numbers that will actually go ashore are. It will be very dependent on the specific priorities and tasks that are laid out. Obviously, a number will go ashore to provide helicopter lift, because Bonhomme Richard has both H-53s and H-46s. And their lift capacity, they're carrying capacity exceeds those of the H-60s that we currently have in Indonesia. There will also be medics. I suspect there will be engineering capability from the Bonhomme Richard that also goes ashore.

So it will be dependent on the task. Some will remain ashore for significant periods of times, but others will use the sea base as a point to provide support.

Q: Admiral Fargo, you mentioned the critical role that helicopters have played in the relief operations. According to the account we were given this morning, there were something like 46 U.S. helicopters in the region. My question is, how much difference is that number of helicopters making? Wouldn't, say, double the number of helicopters be twice as good, or is there a logistical limit on how many helicopters you can operate? And are there any more plans to send any more helicopters?

ADM FARGO: Well, there are plans to send more helicopters. Right now we've got the Fort McHenry under way from Okinawa with six H-46s. We also have the Niagara Falls under way from Guam with additional helicopters. And some of our partner nations like Singapore are going to add additional helicopters. Fundamentally helicopters are a tremendous advantage because, of course, they don't have the same restrictions as fixed-wing aircraft in terms of how many you can have on the ground at a time. You asked the question, is double the number of helicopters better, does that produce twice as much? Maybe pretty close to twice as much, and so it will remain a priority in terms of this relief effort.

Q: Admiral Fargo --Just to follow up on that --

ADM FARGO: Sure.

Q: Are the U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in any way limiting the U.S. ability to provide more aid, particularly in the areas of helicopters or other --

ADM FARGO: None whatsoever.

Q: Why not?

ADM FARGO: Well, fundamentally we had these assets in the Pacific, and we're employing them for an array of other operations. And you know, we have a

certain capacity that we always maintain in the Pacific. So we haven't had to detract those capabilities in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Q: Admiral Fargo, two quick questions, sir, if I may. One, do you plan to send the Mercy, the hospital ship? And two, distribution is now perhaps the most pressing problem; stockpiles of supplies are building up at airfields and elsewhere, but there is just no proper way now to get them to the needed in a hurry. Did you consider, or is it still a possibility that you would consider, air-dropping MREs and bladders of water, or have you ruled it out?

ADM FARGO: Let me answer the first question on Mercy. We're looking very carefully at deploying Mercy. In fact, we've got her on sea trials today to make sure that she's ready to go. We haven't made that decision yet, but if we do we're going to deploy her in an imaginative way. Of course you know that these hospital ships were normally used for trauma in combat, but we think that there may be an opportunity to configure the Mercy with a humanitarian assistance crew -- what might be staffed significantly by nongovernmental organizations and people that have significant medical capability and can provide relief in other forms. So we're looking very closely at this, and this may be an opportunity to use Mercy in a very creative way.

Q: Is the distribution in the airdrop of MREs and water bottles?

ADM FARGO: We're looking at an airdrop. Airdrop requires very close coordination, as you know, on the ground. That means we have to have people into these regions before we can conduct that. But that is one of the courses of action we're examining.

Q: Admiral, I'm wondering if you're satisfied with the level not just of helicopters, but the overall level of assets that you have there and whether or not you plan to increase them. And second of all, the United States Navy was very early on the scene doing assessments, doing aerial surveillance. I'm wondering, have you done your own damage assessments? And I'm wondering, if you have, whether you can share them with us in terms of your own assessments of dead/injured and the economic damage that's been done?

ADM FARGO: Well, I can't speak to the last part of that. You know, we'll have to allow experts that can do economic assessments in a proper way. We have done some assessments that primarily looked at things like infrastructure, what ports and airfields would be usable, where the bridges and roads were out. For example, we know along the south and east coast of Sri Lanka, there are -- some 29 bridges are gone. And we know from looking at the west coast of Sumatra that the devastation is significant and the tsunami went well inland in terms of its level of destruction. So, you know, we have assessments. We also, you know,

worked very closely with the rest of these international organizations to combine and fuse their assessments together such that we can provide a comprehensive effort to address the priorities that we'll develop from those assessments.

Q: Admiral? Could you address the first part of this question, about your satisfaction -- The overall level of --

ADM FARGO: Yeah, I think -- I think we're fine right now. I mean, we're moving things into theater to increase the capacity, and certainly, you know, we're looking at other capability in the continental United States that might be specific to this. But there are other pieces that are moving. For example, the Marine prepositioning ships we're moving toward the area because they have a tremendous water-making capacity, and in addition to that they also have significant engineering capability on board. So, you know, those are capabilities that are particularly important. We're moving environmental preventive medicine units into the area because we recognize that disease could be a factor and we want to get a head start on this. So we're looking at a wide range of capabilities.

Q: Admiral, do you have any preliminary cost estimates of the U.S. military relief effort here, and any idea where the money's going to come from?

ADM FARGO: Well, I can't give you any definitive cost estimates. I mean, we know what it costs to operate a battle group at sea and an expeditionary strike group at sea; about \$2.5 million a day. But that includes the people and the training and the entire investment. A lot of these costs, of course, have taken place already; I mean, a lot of these funds have already been expended for deployments to provide the presence and deterrence in the Western Pacific. I think one of the things that comes to mind immediately is, you know, the American taxpayers made an investment in a very solid and robust military capability that has a wide range of uses, and we're demonstrating the value of that investment today.

Q: Sir?

ADM FARGO: Please.

Q: Could you give us -- a logistical question. You've mentioned several of the ships that are already there. It sounds like there are a lot more coming. Yesterday at PACOM I think they said there are about 13,000 folks in theater or on the way there. What's your glide path? How many ships will you have there, how many people will be there at the height of what you're currently planning?

ADM FARGO: Well, I think the 13,000 number is a pretty good number. And I'd probably break it down right now to say we've got about a thousand people in Thailand; between 100 and 200 at any given point in time in Indonesia and Sri

Lanka and Malaysia; and then about 11,000 -- almost 12,000 at sea. As we bring ships like Fort McHenry and Niagara Falls into play, and other units, these numbers will increase by 10, 15 percent. I'm not nearly as worried about numbers as I am making sure that we have targeted the right capabilities to the problem. So, you know, we're going to stay in close coordination with the relief professionals to make sure that we're providing both them and the host nations what the host nations ask for.

Q: And I'm sorry, about the safety of the forces that are there now, do you have seismic monitors or anything to determine if there is another earthquake of this magnitude and any waves that might come and hit the ships that you have there?

ADM FARGO: Well, we have a pretty extensive system in the Pacific, as you may be aware of, and certainly that will provide an indication if there's another seismic event, and we'll provide those indications to our forces there.

Q: Admiral?

ADM FARGO: Please.

Q: You mentioned earlier that the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan were not a hindrance to what you're doing, and that Pacific Command has enough resources. However, on a day-to-day basis, those resources have an important job deterring and dissuading possible adversaries, defeating them, if required to do so.

ADM FARGO: Sure.

Q: In that first 24 hours, what kind of risk analysis did you undertake to make sure that the national security mission is not hindered by the relief mission?

ADM FARGO: Well, you know, this is almost a continuing process at PACOM. Every time we evaluate a deployment order, every time we look at moving force structure even north to south or east to west, we do a risk assessment as to how it impacts our ability to deter.

I also stay in very close contact with folks like General Leon LaPorte in Korea. And in this particular case we talked about Korea in some depth, and I was very comfortable with the movement of our forces. So it's an ongoing process. We did a solid risk assessment and I am comfortable with our posture.

Q: Admiral?

ADM FARGO: Please.

Q: You mentioned that the long-standing military relationship with Thailand helped ease the way toward getting things started. Can you contrast that to the situation in having to deal with the Indonesian military and the Indonesian government, where you didn't have that kind of history?

ADM FARGO: I don't want to -- Thailand is -- you know, is a treaty ally and they have been very helpful, but I don't want to give you the impression that Thailand is the only one that stood up right away, because all the countries of the region have. You know, we've put together this Combined Support Force headed by General Blackman, and of course the basis of that, the basis of their effort is a multinational standard operating procedure that has been worked through by 31 countries in the region. So this isn't something that just comes together at a moment's notice; it's based on an investment of time and effort collectively of all the countries in the region. And very frankly, the reason we have the access we do, the support we do and have been able to move with the kind of speed is because we made an investment in these relationships in theater security cooperation in the past over many years.

Q: Does that include Indonesia?

ADM FARGO: It includes Indonesia, obviously, to a lesser extent because of some of the restrictions that we've had, but we have worked hard to build that relationship with Indonesia over the last two years.

Q: Admiral, can you tell us about any particular challenges that the pilots of the helicopters are facing as they're going and delivering the relief supplies and then in turn picking up some of the injured when it comes to finding villages, finding specific destinations, because the tsunami in some cases changed the landscape so dramatically? Can you discuss if that is at all a problem and how they're managing to grapple with that?

ADM FARGO: I think that's probably a better question for General Blackman and the folks on the scene, and maybe even Admiral Crowder, who, of course, is working those helos into specific locations. But just from a generic standpoint, of course you've got to find a landing zone, and sometimes we'll go over and try to do some reconnaissance in advance to find a good, clean landing zone that you can get the helicopter down. And then of course coordination on the ground is important too to make sure that you don't injure anybody in the process of moving the helo in. Those are probably the biggest considerations, just the safety of the operation.

But, you know, our folks are well-trained at this, and those air crews on the helicopters have some significant experience of moving into places where maybe they haven't had an opportunity to train before, and they're doing it very successfully.

Q: Admiral –

Q: I'm just wondering, as a follow-up to that, when you just said you went in initially to survey the region and find out where there were ports that were usable, where there were landing fields or strips or areas that were usable, did the U.S. military find areas that it had known and was familiar with before dramatically changed? Was that at all a difficulty?

ADM FARGO: Indonesia and specifically Aceh is not a place that we have a lot of operating familiarity, so the answer to that is probably no.

Q: Admiral, you talked about some previous humanitarian missions that PACOM had run. Had you planned for or even envisioned anything on this scale or to this magnitude in your, you know, previous planning?

ADM FARGO: Well, it's hard to say you've ever planned for anything on this magnitude because, frankly, you know, we haven't seen anything of this size before. But I would say that, you know, Cobra Gold, which is our large multinational exercise that we conduct every year in Thailand, is specifically pointed toward humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and peacekeeping, and of course it brings a large number of the nations of the region together to work in this same manner. So you can't point yourself toward a specific catastrophe like this, but you can put in place the basic training, the habitual relationships, and as I pointed out the standard operating procedures that apply to a wide range of contingencies and crises.

Q: Admiral?

Q: Sir –

Q: Admiral, there are reports that Sri Lanka has scaled back its request for what they need there. Can you give us an update on what the request is, what you have there, what assets you have there, what you have headed there? And also, I've read on the wires that some of the rebels there are suggesting that there are less than humanitarian interests involved in some of the assets that are being sent there.

ADM FARGO: Well, Sri Lanka -- very specifically there's been a great deal of international aid go into Colombo, and of course the immediate priority is distribution. What the Sri Lankans have asked for -- and in my conversations with our ambassador out there, he's pointed out that engineering assistance is going to be helpful. And this would be, you know, the kind of engineering assistance that might be provided by Seabees, for example, just to make roads passable and bridges usable. That and medical assistance are the two biggest requests from Sri Lanka, and so we're tailoring our response accordingly.

Q: Sir, to come back to the question –

ADM FARGO: Please.

Q: -- thank you -- of cost, do you foresee a point where the cost of having all these different groups working on this might start to be a problem? This is something that's going to be going on for a long time. At what point does the money start to become a worry?

ADM FARGO: Well, I think, you know, the international community has stepped up magnificently in terms of funds for this, and certainly the cost piece of this thing is not something that is significant to my planning right now. And I'd like to reiterate once again that one of the reasons we're able to do this is because we've already made this investment in carrier battle groups and the expeditionary strike groups and the C-130s and the P-3s and the training. So we have a lot of this available and we use it for multiple purposes, and right now we're using it for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Q: Admiral Fargo, on the subject of particularly Americans who are still unaccounted for, does the U.S. military's mission include particularly helping to account for Americans and to identify remains of Americans?

ADM FARGO: I would say that the primary lead on that belongs to the State Department and the chief of mission in country, and we're responding to their requests.

Q: How about forensics teams? Are you expanding the number of forensics teams you're sending --

ADM FARGO: We are providing forensics teams. As you know, I have the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command that is resident in Hawaii and part of the Pacific Command, and they have significant expertise in this area.

Q: I have a follow-up on another question. You mentioned that in Aceh Province you obviously haven't had much experience there, mainly because of the conflict that's been going on. Can you talk about the conflict there as well as in Sri Lanka -- what you see on the ground, how the disaster has affected things on the ground? Do you see that as a potential problem, particularly in Aceh Province, of getting aid to people and in terms of just protecting U.S. forces --

ADM FARGO: Well, we haven't seen it as a problem in terms of aid distribution or relief. And I would hope that this catastrophe, as awful as it is, might provide an opportunity for these different factions to move closer together.

Q: Admiral, I apologize for belaboring this question, but --

STAFF: We have time for a couple more.

Q: -- I'm having a little trouble understanding this. I know you mentioned that more helicopters are being sent and you outlined a couple –

ADM FARGO: Right.

Q: -- I think a dozen or so. But since they seem to be so important and so valuable, why aren't you sending significantly larger numbers of helicopters? Is it that they're not available? Is it that they can't be used? Is it that they're not really needed or –

ADM FARGO: I think we are sending significantly large numbers. You know, we're taking -- we're going to use medevac helicopters out of Korea. As I said, we're taking helicopters out of Guam, the helicopter detachment we have there. And I think that's going to answer the mail in terms of the capability that we need in these countries. You also have to understand that there are helicopters on the Singapore ships -- the LST, that is there. The Japanese are going to provide an LST; they're going to have vertical-lift capability. The Indians have significant helicopters in play also.

Q: Do you have any idea how many U.S. military helicopters will be deployed eventually?

ADM FARGO: Well, I would say probably double the number that we have right now. That's a rough order of magnitude just based on the flow that I've looked at. And if we find that we can't, you know, address those concerns with what we have, then we'll reach farther. But my sense is that the other thing that's going to come into play here is there's a great deal of international work being done by professional relief and aid agencies -- NGOs, if you will. And, of course, as I said, the international community has been very generous with their funding. So some of this capability in the very near future will be contracted, too, and that will get money into the economies, and that will be helpful also.

Q: Admiral, one quick follow-up.

ADM FARGO: Okay.

Q: It doesn't have much to do with the humanitarian efforts. But you're using, I think for the first time, the WestPac Express, this high-speed vessel out of Okinawa.

ADM FARGO: Right.

Q: Is this in effect -- it's a long distance. Is this the longest distance she's traveled? And is this kind of a shake-down cruise for the future, perhaps, for the type of naval vessel?

ADM FARGO: Well, I can't tell you whether this is the longest distance that the -- this is the high-speed vessel we're talking about, the WestPac Express that the Marines have been leasing for the last year and a half. And we've found it provides tremendous utility.

The reason I can't answer the specific question is the WestPac Express has been almost everywhere in the Pacific over the last 18 months, including down to Australia. But I think the message is, is that high-speed vessels of this nature, vessels that can move 40, 45 knots, that can carry a great deal of cargo -- in this case she's actually moving helicopters -- are going to be a big part of the future.

Q: Sir?

ADM FARGO: Last question.

Q: On the seismic activity, what did PACOM notice on the morning that this happened? And what's your standard operating procedure? Do you guys have an arrangement that you alert other militaries, other governments? And is there talk of changing that?

ADM FARGO: Well, fundamentally, as I said, there is a Pacific Tsunami Warning System that worked in the Pacific. There isn't one, as you know, in the Indian Ocean. The Tsunami Warning Center picked up the seismic event and made an evaluation with respect to the Pacific and notified the Pacific Command. You know, what obviously is going to have to be addressed in the future is whether we need -- and by "we" I mean the international community -- needs a similar system in the Indian Ocean.

Thanks very much --

Q: Can you clarify the helicopters?

Q: Admiral, do you anticipate the call-up of any Reserves, particularly medical and Seabees, to help augment your forces? And is that a situation that might be difficult with Iraq and Afghanistan deployments?

ADM FARGO: Right now we haven't made any specific requests for medical reserves. We'll continue to evaluate the situation that develops. I think, you know, if we can do a good job of getting water into these locations, do a good job of preventing disease, do a good job of using the capabilities we have at hand right now, like these preventive medicine units that we're already sending, that, hopefully, that won't be required.

Q: Admiral, when you said double the number of helicopters, can you give us a figure for the current? What figure should we double?

ADM FARGO: I think the fact sheet you have right now currently says we have about 45 actually in the theater now. And that number could double. But I would also add that we're not doing this in isolation, and we will look at the contributions that are being made by the wide range of militaries in the region and make sure that the aggregate can handle the problem.

Q: The \$2.5 million operating costs per day, was that only for the carrier battle group or did that include other ships?

ADM FARGO: That's just for the carrier battle group.

Q: Thank you, Admiral.

Q: (Off mike.)

ADM FARGO: Thank you, everyone.

Q: Could you stay another half-hour? (Laughter.)

(C) COPYRIGHT 2005, FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC., 1000 VERMONT AVE. NW; 5TH FLOOR; WASHINGTON, DC - 20005, USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ANY REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION IS EXPRESSLY PROHIBITED. UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION CONSTITUTES A MISAPPROPRIATION UNDER APPLICABLE UNFAIR COMPETITION LAW, AND FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. RESERVES THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ALL REMEDIES AVAILABLE TO IT IN RESPECT TO SUCH MISAPPROPRIATION. FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. IS A PRIVATE FIRM AND IS NOT AFFILIATED WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. NO COPYRIGHT IS CLAIMED AS TO ANY PART OF THE ORIGINAL WORK PREPARED BY A UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT OFFICER OR EMPLOYEE AS PART OF THAT PERSON'S OFFICIAL DUTIES. FOR INFORMATION ON SUBSCRIBING TO FNS, PLEASE CALL JACK GRAEME AT 202-347-1400.

(END)