

Cdn aid agencies appeal for donations; step up efforts for Myanmar relief

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TORONTO - Canadian aid agencies stepped up efforts to get relief for cyclone-hit Myanmar on Wednesday, with a group of four agencies calling for donations and another sending a five-person aid team towards the country.

GlobalMedic's rapid response team, which left from Toronto on Wednesday, was equipped with five million water purification tablets, 21 water purification units and \$1 million worth of medicine to stave off water-borne diseases.

Meanwhile, four Canadian aid agencies, under the banner of the Humanitarian Coalition, launched an appeal for donations.

The coalition, comprised of CARE Canada, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam-Quebec and Save the Children Canada, said Canadians can donate by calling a toll-free number (1-800-464-9154) or logging onto www.thehumanitariancoalition.ca.

"Right now the most critical needs we are seeing is plastic sheeting for shelter, water purification tablets, cooking sets, mosquito nets and some emergency supplies for health and food," said Colleen Malone, program manager of child protection and emergencies for Save the Children Canada, in an interview from Calgary.

Malone said Save the Children, which has been in Myanmar for 13 years, has reached 50,000 people in the past couple of days.

The Salvation Army is providing cooked meals and distributing it to needy families in Myanmar, where it has operated since 1915. It has launched its own appeal to Canadians to donate money.

World Vision, which has worked in Myanmar for more than 40 years and is providing rice, clean drinking water, clothing, blankets and tarpaulins to the cyclone victims, has launched a \$1 million relief campaign.

The cyclone in Myanmar on Saturday killed more than 22,000 people, left 41,000 missing and an estimated one million people homeless.

Matt Capobianco, manager of emergency programs with GlobalMedic, said one of the first tasks will be to secure visas for the aid-team members headed to Myanmar.

The UN and other agencies reported Wednesday that relief operations have been hampered by the Myanmar government's stalling on issuing visas to aid workers. Aid workers said the government prefers aid be distributed by relief workers already in the country, rather than allowing foreigners into the country.

If it secures the visas, the GlobalMedic team plans to stay in the field in Myanmar for 10 days, and leave the water purification units and medicines behind with partners in the country so water can continue to be purified.

Capobianco, who is not going to Myanmar with the team, said there will be difficulties delivering aid.

"A lot of trees have been knocked down, blocking road access, so that's definitely going to be an issue we're expecting to encounter," he said.

If the team is unable to secure visas, Capobianco said it would find a way to get the aid into the country through a partner already operating in Myanmar.

Over the past five years, GlobalMedic said it has run more than 30 international disaster relief operations including 11 last year.

The United Nations describes the lower region of the Irrawaddy delta - considered Myanmar's rice bowl - as under salt water and witnesses report seeing bodies floating in the water.

Capobianco said he was optimistic the team will find fresh water sources to run its purification systems, as the tablets and units cannot purify salt water.

Canada has pledged up to \$2 million in humanitarian aid but has not decided whether to deploy its Disaster Assistance Response Team.