

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE VIA TELECONFERENCE WITH MICHAEL RITCHIE, DIRECTOR, COMMAND INTERAGENCY ENGAGEMENT GROUP TIME: 8:32 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 27, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): I'd like to welcome to the bloggers roundtable this morning. And Michael Ritchie is the director of the interagency efforts that have -- employed in support of Department of State, the lead federal agency for the operations in Georgia and the relief operations there.

So, Mr. Ritchie, the floor is yours. We can begin when you're ready.

MR. RITCHIE: Thank you. I'll -- fine, I'll start with a brief statement, sort of a follow-on to -- (audio break).

Consistent with the national defense strategy that identifies requirements for building partner capacity, greater interagency -- (audio break). The Department of Defense is part of a larger United States response to the government of Georgia's request for humanitarian assistance. The Department of State is the lead federal agency -- (audio break) -- relief operations -- (audio break) --

MR. HOLT: Okay. Excuse me, Mr. Ritchie, you're kind of breaking up there.

MR. RITCHIE: Okay.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Are you still with us?

MR. RITCHIE: Yes, I'm here.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Yeah, we're kind of -- it was kind of dropping out there about every other word.

MR. RITCHIE: Sorry.

MR. HOLT: That's all right, sir.

MR. RITCHIE: I'll just get a little closer.

MR. HOLT: Okay. I think -- yeah, that seems to be better. So --

MR. RITCHIE: Okay.

MR. HOLT: Sorry for the interruption.

MR. RITCHIE: I'll just continue.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

MR. RITCHIE: Operation Assured Delivery is the Department of Defense effort executed by European Command in support and coordination through the Department of State and USAID. United States European Command Interagency Engagement Group is the focal point for this unique interagency coordination. Included on our staff are senior-level Department of State and USAID advisors that provide direct input to DOD operations. This accessible government relationship has resulted in nearly \$21 million worth of humanitarian assistance being delivered to the Georgian people in need.

For instance, on Monday, four United States European Command flights delivered 25,000 daily rations and 31,000 meals ready to eat. As of 25 August, we've worked together to conduct over 50 flights of this nature in support of U.S. government relief efforts. Every item delivered was requested by USAID and validated by the government of Georgia. The Department of Defense and European Command stand ready to assist as required, to save lives and alleviate human suffering during this humanitarian crisis. Working side by side with the Republic of Georgia and international organizations, U.S. European Command is providing immediate lifesaving support and restoring essential life support systems as part of a coordinated interagency effort. Now, I'm prepared to respond to your questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. And Andrew, you were first on the line, so why don't you get us started.

Q Yes, sir. Mr. Ritchie, Andrew Lubin from U.S. Naval Proceedings -- Institute's Proceedings and Get the Gouge. Appreciate you taking the time, sir.

This morning it's reported that the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Dallas has turned away from Poti and had to dock in Batumi. And I guess the destroyer McFaul docked in Batumi the other day. Do we have any muscle in the Black Sea in case -- to back up these ships? And what kind of fleet do the Russians have out there apparently blockading, keeping us out of Poti?

MR. RITCHIE: Well, the decision to not go into Poti was more complicated than that. It had -- it also had to do with roadblocks on the roads that would have impeded us taking the humanitarian assistance from the port into the needed areas. The first ship to go in, the McFaul, went into Batumi. It was off-loaded there. Much of the infrastructure was there. And a great part of the decision to continue to go into Batumi was as a result of the logistical infrastructure. We do not -- we're -- we certainly have enough muscle, if that is the issue, to do what needs to be necessary -- what might be necessary, but our hope is that we are going to focus on the humanitarian relief effort and we will assume that the Russians will not impede -- (inaudible) -- effort.

Q Okay. Let me follow-up, then I'll get off. But, sir, aren't they impeding if they're blockading Poti and you can't get anything out? That's the humanitarian crisis from that area on up, isn't it?

MR. RITCHIE: Well, I'm not sure we can say that they're actually blockading Poti. The checkpoints that they have --

Q Jack, I'm missing that.

MR. RITCHIE: Yeah. No, no. I'm just stopping to look something up here. Yeah, we do have an assessment team in there to take a look. We -- I believe what we're doing is taking the more prudent approach focusing on the humanitarian assistance effort, rather than try -- to try to -- until we know exactly what the mission of the Russian roadblocks -- checkpoints are.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Let's see -- Jim, you were next on line, so go ahead.
Q Hi, Jim Dolbow with An Official Coast Guard Blog. Mr. Ritchie, what has it been like working with the Coast Guard on this humanitarian relief mission?

MR. RITCHIE: The Coast Guard is and always has been an excellent partner. Part of the larger maritime force, it is fortunate to us that the Dallas happened to be in the European theater for these time engagement mission and this opportunity happens to avail itself.

We are really pleased to have the Dallas as part of this humanitarian relief effort. This is the kind of thing for which the Coast Guard has a great deal of experience. And we're proud to have them as part of the six fleet team that's providing this assistance.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. And Chuck.

Q And good morning, sir. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. I have two questions. Using Batumi as the port of entry instead of the much larger port at Poti, are we having to provide any infrastructure or temporary infrastructure in Batumi to ensure that we can off-load those supplies?

MR. RITCHIE: We are not providing infrastructure. The government of Georgia and the vast number of non-governmental organizations that were present in Georgia prior to the sixth of August have made this transition actually quite easy. The goods are being off-loaded rapidly, there are no backlogs and the NGOs are able to deliver these -- (audio break) -- to the point of need extremely fast. So this is working -- this is working quite smoothly and we have not had to bring in anything special to augment what's already there.

Q Okay. And my second question concerns one of the aircraft involved in bringing supplies in is listed as a C-9. That typically is a medical evacuation aircraft. Are we evacuating Georgian wounded to perhaps Landstuhl or one of the EUCOM military hospitals?

MR. RITCHIE: We are not. I'll check the data point about the C-9. We have used a number of aircraft to carry in the humanitarian supplies. It's called the C-9 Skytrain. And we also went in with a C-40 Clipper aircraft. We are using available appropriated-sized aircraft for the requested supplies, but we are not providing medical assistance outside of Georgia.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Scott, you were with us. You still with us? Q Yes, I am. Actually, I'm a little curious about -- I'm a little confused with the response to Andrew's questions about the ships being turned back with -- because of roadblocks and being prudent. And at the same time, it seems like if there's roadblocks there and we're having to turn back our ships, then isn't that effectively a Russian blockade? Could you explain that a little?

MR. RITCHIE: To use the term blockade, it's powerful words. And I am not going to be the one that's going -- that is going to call what is happening there a blockade. We're not exactly sure whether the supplies could flow in there. There's been some damage in the port of Poti. There have been some ships that have been sunk, some question about the draft, and unless we know that we have a sure point to come in -- you know, the checkpoints that are set up in and around Poti are just part of the decision that was made. Our focus here is to get the humanitarian aid in as fast as possible.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. RITCHIE: All right. And someone else joined us. Who else is with us?

All right. Well, have we got any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, I do. Sir, Andrew Lubin again. And I hate to drag in this, but this seems to be really the gist of what's happened in Georgia between them and the Russians and the United States. The American embassy in Georgia said that the ship was going to dock in Poti and then apparently she got turned away. I mean, that's why we're asking this and this was on the news tickers this morning. And I appreciate that the term blockade is not certain definitions under international law, but -- so avoiding that, if they're not letting us in and they're turning us way, that's not a harbinger for good relations between us and them and certainly for you bringing the humanitarian relief into the bad areas of the country.

MR. RITCHIE: I understand that. And if this were clear enough -- I mean, I wish I could give you a clear answer. What is clear is that no one turned us away. It was a U.S. government decision to go to the port that we knew we could off-load without question. Until we get a clear assessment, it would not be prudent to try to force something where we don't know whether we can get the aid there.

Q Okay. Fair enough. And just so you know, I'm quoting this off of MSNBC that came in at 6:59 Eastern time this morning. Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anyone else?

Q I have a question. Chuck Simmins again. There have been reports that additional naval vessels are arriving with supplies from other NATO countries. I've seen German suggested, I've seen Turkish suggested. Can you speak to what other nations are involved in providing assistance through their militaries? MR. RITCHIE: No, I don't have any of that data. I do know that the government of Georgia is receiving offers of assistance from a great number of other NATO members and United Nations members. And I don't have that data for you.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And sir, what would you -- just as -- I just kind of want to give you a chance to speak to some other things here, so what's on the average -- what would you want the average U.S. citizen to know about what's happening there in Georgia and what we're doing, what our efforts are?

MR. RITCHIE: Well, I think it's important for the average American to understand that the United States is responding to a humanitarian crisis that was perpetrated upon a democratic nation and a member of the United Nations, that we're doing everything we can to try to alleviate the suffering of the people there on the ground. This is consistent with United States actions in any other humanitarian assistance issues around the world. This one is more complicated because in this case it was man-made and was unnecessary.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Okay. Well, if nobody's got any other questions, then, sir, I'd like to --

Q Yeah, actually I do if you guys don't mind.

MR. RITCHIE: I don't mind.

Q Good. Andrew Lubin again. And not a sea-based question, so you can relax. Where does the -- where is the aid going into? You've got aid going to Gori in the northern areas or can you tell us roughly where things are getting distributed in to?

MR. RITCHIE: It's being distributed throughout the country. The NGOs are present throughout the -- there are 160 U.S.-based NGOs that USAID is in contact with in Georgia, some of them big and some of them very small. But they are the ones that are doing the delivering, primarily in the Tblisi area where many persons were displaced, but it's also going into other areas as well within the Republic of Georgia.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anything else?

Q Can I ask one more? This is Scott from Flopping Aces. You said that there's assessment teams on the ground. Can you describe what they are seeing on the ground as far as the humanitarian crisis and the depth and what -- just some details on it?

MR. RITCHIE: Well, what we're seeing right now are an awful lot of people -- there were well over 100,000 people in the Tblisi area that were displaced. And they want to go home and that's primarily what's going on. Much of the World Food Program -- the USAID-funded feeding programs are taking care of those people who are on the move and headed back to their homes. We are taking -- doing assessments as well on conditions of the infrastructure to see what was damaged during the conflict, to do follow-on assessments as to what we might have to provide in terms -- I don't know what that might be -- power grid, water supply, whatever that happens to be.

Q Thank you.

MR. RITCHIE: Those are the kinds of things that we want to have eyes on so we can best advise.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right. Well, thank you gentlemen and thank you, Mr. Ritchie, for joining us here for the bloggers roundtable today. We

appreciate the time and look forward to possibly another update here as time goes on.

MR. RITCHIE: I almost enjoyed it.

(Laughter.)

Thank you, Jack.

END.