



National Council on Disability

An independent federal agency making recommendations to the President and Congress to enhance the quality of life for all Americans with disabilities and their families.

March 21, 2011

The Honorable Raj Shah
Administrator
United States Agency for International Development
Washington, DC
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20523

Dear Administrator Shah:

We have an opportunity to assist the many citizens who have disabilities, and those who acquire a disability, as a result of the devastating triple disasters of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear plant breakdown in Japan.

It is critical for USAID to organize a response that fully addresses the needs of people with disabilities that builds on USAID's prior efforts. In Haiti, for instance, USAID conducted conference calls discussing emergency preparedness in Haiti specifically addressing the needs of people with disabilities and sent a disability expert to assess the situation on the ground and to work with its non-governmental partner organization, Handicap International to organize relief and immediate assistance in the crisis.¹ USAID's initial assessment report identified some positive measures and provided suggestions for the next steps.² The report noted that "[n]o disaster is completely natural"³ and thus underscored that the pre-existing environment weighs heavily in determining the efficacy of any disaster relief effort and preparedness is essential." Here, again, USAID should build on the lessons learned in Haiti and reach out to its government and non-governmental partners in mounting a response.

We must not forget how Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the U.S. and the Asian Tsunami in 2004 highlighted the inadequacy of emergency preparedness and disaster assistance efforts to address the specific needs of people with disabilities and underscored the need to make humanitarian response accessible. During these disasters, people with disabilities were left behind and trapped in their homes for days. Where they survived long enough to be evacuated, it was done without due regard for their need for assistive

¹ USAID, HAITI MISSION REPORT FEBRUARY 6-MARCH 7, 2010 (2010), *available at* <http://onerresponse.info/Disasters/Haiti/disabilities/publicdocuments/Eitel%20Haiti%20Feb-Mar%202010%20Report%20-final%20draft.doc>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

devices or the provision of adequate support in shelters. Many shelters were not accessible to people who use wheelchairs or who had other support needs. A UN-commissioned review of overall humanitarian responses⁴ and the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition⁵ report found that transparency, communication, and accountability to affected populations was notably lacking in relief efforts. The findings further illustrate that humanitarian assistance organizations are too often unprepared to address even basic needs of people with disabilities in facilitating access to shelter, food, water, and health care services.⁶

We are already working with the Department of State (DOS) and contacts in your agency in determining the extent of assistance needed in Japan. We understand DOS and USAID are in the process of compiling resources and have offered assistance through diplomatic channels to the government of Japan in addressing the needs of people with disabilities.

Although there is no silver lining to such a horrific loss of life and property, we will have a chance help rebuild a stronger Japan, including by constructing new and more accessible residences and providing better access to schools, hospitals, and government buildings. The United States is well-positioned to lead the world in the rebuilding efforts in Japan, and demonstrate again how to build on the tremendous human potential of the more than 600 million people who have disabilities. NCD stands ready to assist.

Sincerely,



Jonathan Young
Chairman

⁴ UN Secretary General, *Strengthening Emergency Relief, Rehabilitation, Recovery and Prevention in the Aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami Disaster: Rep. of the Secretary General*, U.N. Doc. A/62/83-E/2007/67 (May 21, 2007).

⁵ Cosgrove J, Tsunami Evaluation Commission Synthesis Report: Expanded Summary. Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami. (Rachel Houghton ed., 1st ed., 2007).

⁶ Following these disasters, the National Council on Disability issued a report titled, *Effective Emergency Management: Making Improvements for Communities and People with Disabilities* http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2009/NCD_EmergencyManagement_HTML/EffectiveEmergencyManagement.html