

Aid groups fear Haitian relief diverts funds from other needs

By Mary Beth Sheridan Washington Post Staff Writer Friday, February 12, 2010; A19

The U.S. government's disaster-assistance program has committed more than half its annual budget to help earthquake-ravaged Haiti, raising concern among humanitarian groups that programs for the needy in countries such as Sudan or Somalia could face cuts.

Samuel A. Worthington, the president of InterAction, a coalition of more than 150 humanitarian groups, wrote Thursday to top officials at the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development that he was "deeply concerned about the impact" that reductions would have in other regions.

Some aid groups said they have been told there probably will be no money for new programs, at least until the disaster fund gets a boost from Congress.

USAID officials denied Thursday that they have ordered any cutbacks, adding that they hope they will not have to do so. But that will depend, they said, on whether their disaster fund is replenished by a supplemental spending bill that Congress is expected to take up in the next few weeks.

"We're working very hard to make sure all our programs can continue full speed ahead," said Susan Reichle, a top USAID official. She said agency officials had started prioritizing projects in different parts of the world in case the congressional funds are slow to arrive or are less than anticipated.

The 2010 budget for the disaster program -- known as the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, or OFDA -- is about \$845 million. It normally provides for not just unexpected calamities, such as the Haiti earthquake, but also for programs dealing with ongoing emergencies such as the fighting in Congo and the refugee crisis in Sudan.

Reichle disputed an allegation in Worthington's letter that officials planned to slash disaster funds for non-Haiti programs by 40 percent, saying no policy decisions have been made on reductions. But aid groups said they are already seeing some reluctance to approve new programs.

Catholic Relief Services had been seeking funds to expand a program it runs to provide water, shelter, kitchen items and other goods to people displaced by war in eastern Congo. "We were told this would be next to impossible," said Lisa Kuennen-Asfaw, a spokeswoman for the group.

The organization had also submitted a proposal to help 2,800 people in a rural area of Nicaragua battered by Hurricane Ida several months ago.

"We got a note from OFDA saying their current global priority is Haiti. That has impacted their budget overall," Kuennen-Asfaw said.

"We are extremely grateful for the U.S. government response to Haiti, but that doesn't mean the needs in other crisis-affected regions are going to go away," she said.

The White House is expected to add more money for the disaster fund to a supplemental spending bill it sent to Congress this month. Congressional staff workers estimated it could take two months to pass the bill, which is also likely to include a significant sum for Haiti.

"I don't think there's a whole lot of doubt they plan to replenish those [disaster] funds," a Senate staff member said. "If the past is any indication, the Congress supports doing so. But it can take some time."