

“Update on Operation Tomodachi”
Remarks by Rear Admiral Scott Swift, U.S. Pacific Command

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Thank you for those kind comments. Don't feel too sorry for me out here. I've got a great staff that works for me and other directors as well. My day actually starts about one in the morning. So, I'm fully awake at this point and welcome the opportunity to share some thoughts.

I'd like to start off first in recognizing Congressman Larsen and the great leadership and support that he has provided. As he had mentioned, my last tour of duty was commanding a carrier strike group that was homeport at Everett, Washington. And I can tell you his support for Navy families is both personal and heartfelt, and I very much appreciate that.

I'd also like recognize Minister Chiba, and understand that Ambassador Fujisaki is off doing other important things as well. But, on behalf of PACOM, I'd like to offer our condolences to the people of Japan, and recognize as well not only the magnitude of this tragedy but the fact that the tragedy has been eclipsed by the response of the Japanese people in dealing with it. And it has been an extraordinary experience to work in support of them as they have responded.

There's three points that I would make, and I'll try to be brief to take as many questions as possible. And those three points center on the alliance, on the interagency response and capacity--well, actually capacity of the military. But, I would like to point out that many think--many people think that the military is stretched thin. And while the military is challenged, I think this is an opportunity to reflect on the capacity that some might think that we don't have.

On the alliance piece, Congressman Larsen touched on this in his comments. And I came in about halfway into his comments so I may have missed some of them. But, the first thing I would say is any response is facilitated if it can be built on a--what exists in a strong foundation. And that is certainly the case with the Japanese.

We have had a long, deep foundational relationship built over years of experience of working and operating together. And those foundational relationships have been furthered by the personal engagement of Admiral Willard. He has a close personal relationship with General Ariki as well as Ambassador Roos, and that has been very helpful as we move forward in support of the Japanese from the PACOM perspective, largely focused on the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force, but as well working as an enabling partner with the various US interagency organizations and NGOs that are engaged in this effort.

And the last thing I'll say about the alliance is crisis either imbibe you--it either fractures or further forges relationships. And these are very, very challenging times for the Japanese government, the Japanese Self-Defense Force, certainly with the Japanese energy industry. And you would expect that, in a situation like that, that relationships would become frayed and potentially adversarial.

And, in fact, I can assure you just the opposite has occurred. And I would say at the end of this, we--our relationship, certainly with the maritime--or the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, has taken a significant step forward, beyond even as strong as it has been in the past.

The second point I wanted to speak to was the interagency. And it's always difficult coordinating just within military channels, much less outside of DOD. And the norm is, in those interactions, is to work problems in a series-based approach, that you move from one step to the next step in dealing with issues.

And quite frankly, that approach just wouldn't work based on this crisis. And we really need--and we've learned this in the past, and it's been difficult to come up with a model by which we could function. But, I think in this case we really have been successful in operating at the speed of crisis.

And we've done that by rapidly gaining the pace of the crisis, which has enabled the interagency to think ahead of the problem. And if you can think ahead of the problem, then you can start putting solutions in place and start to anticipate the direction the problem's going.

And how that's happened is a bit of a--I think an ad hoc development. It's resulted in the relationships that have been fostered most recently with the Haiti response. But, the result has been, instead of a series approach to a problem, it's a parallel approach where interagencies are working the problem at the same time that DOD entities are and the same time NGOs are. And we've come up with mechanisms to crosswalk those parallel efforts to ensure that they're synchronized and to avoid duplicated efforts.

And this is something that I think that, once we work our way through the problem, we're going to have to spend some time thinking about and integrating in a codified manner so that we can repeat them in a future. But, essentially, it's individuals and organizations approaching the problem in an innovative way instead of a rules-based approach. And I think that's an important point.

And to my last point of capacity, I'd like to point out that when we started this effort, this response to the earthquake and tsunami and eventually transitioned to the issue with reactors, the Libyan operation had not been initiated yet. We didn't have the UN mandate. Bahrain and Yemen were largely on positive vectors. And since PACOM has become engaged in supporting the Japanese Self-Defense Force, those three issues have accelerated in what I would say is a negative direction.

And during our response and, in fact, still supporting the response, we've got two carrier strike groups as well as an amphibious ready group and a number of other Naval assets, Air Force assets, Army assets, Marine assets, and Coast Guard assets that are all engaged to support this effort.

And in the meantime, we continue to push the USS Boxer Amphibious Ready Group to CENTCOM to support their risk mitigation efforts with respect to the instability that's occurring in CENTCOM's AOR. And CENTCOM, in turn, has continued to support with resources originally assigned to CENTCOM, sending those resources to AFRICOM to support the operation in Libya.

And we have continued apace our exercise program throughout the AOR to ensure that we maintain overwatch and engagement in shaping the environment. So, I would suggest that we are--certainly have the capacity to cover down on significant global challenges. Not necessarily a challenge to the US, but truly global challenges at the same time in PACOM, CENTCOM, and AFRICOM.

I won't run through the numbers of all that we have contributed in support of the Self-Defense Forces, but would point out with all that contribution, largely unnoticed and unreported, we have supported the volunteer departure of over 7,000 US citizens from Japan, transported to the US, organized by PACOM and supported by TRANSCOM.

And I'd like to close and open to questions with the comment that our supporting role has allowed us to closely observe the Japanese response. And it's nothing less than phenomenal.

There's two anecdotal comments I would share with you.

One is with the Marine forces that we had in place, it's actually a joint force in--at Sendai airport, they received a request from the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to visit three schools and to remediate largely tsunami damage so that they could get back to some normalcy with schools and classes being reestablished.

The first of two schools that they arrived at, the local populous had already completely remediated the effects of the tsunami. And by the time they arrived at the third school, and this is all within one day, that school was about half complete. So, they pitched in with the local populous to help finish that.

The second point I would make, I saw a picture in a brief that we received from the Joint Support Force in Japan led by Admiral Walsh, and there was a before and after picture. And the before picture was a road that was split by five to six feet. It looked like, in the picture, as a result of the earthquake. The after picture was a road that was completely repaired, not only the road completely repaved, but the shoulders of the road was--there was no debris. The ground had been completely cleaned up.

And I asked the question if they had the heading on the picture right. It looked like a before picture of the road was before the earthquake and then the picture of the fractured road after the earthquake. It really is quite phenomenal.

And the last thing, I'd like to thank the NBR for this opportunity to phone in. And I regret that I can't be there in person, but very much appreciate the work that you continue to do to bring greater understanding to the Asian region in general.

So, with that, I'd be happy to take a few questions.

Dr. Rich Ellings: Thank you so much, Admiral. We really needed to hear also the extent to which something around the world may affect Pacific Command. Obviously, there's a--there is a tremendous capability but also finite capabilities, so that when crazy things go on that are unforeseen that we have to jockey among the various commands to make sure that we're covering everything, not to mention you got to do your regular stuff and obviously Operation Tomodachi at the same time.

So, you guys, I know, are on 24/7. It's incredible. I want to mention to everybody that one of the more remarkable things that Pacific Command Admiral Willard has done in representing the United States is he and his wife Donna went to Japan. Admiral Willard has been spending a lot of time in Japan. But, his wife Donna went there, going to disaster areas and so on. So, in person representing the face of America, our concerns as well as leadership in doing whatever we can. So, it's a remarkable operation.

All right. A couple quick questions, because we do have a panel and we want to get to that, of Admiral Swift. Is there something, kind of any breaking news that maybe you're interested in, or the operation? Questions?

This is the human being who's in charge of the entire operation over there. So, I encourage--there's a gentlemen back here. Could you identify yourself?

Q: I am Satoshi Ogawa with Yomiuri Shimbun, a Japanese daily newspaper. Admiral, thank you for your contribution to the Japanese people. And we very much appreciate the--Operation Tomodachi.

And my question is how long are you going to continue this huge amount of the relief effort? And how will that affect to your defense posture and defense power in East Asia? Thank you.

Dr. Rich Ellings: Did you get that, Admiral?

Rear Admiral Scott Swift: I did. Thank you. And that is a great question.

To the question of how long we will maintain a presence, the answer is simply as long as the Japanese people and the--and more particular the Japanese Self-Defense Force requires our assistance.

I will say that we're much further along in dealing with the humanitarian assistance and the disaster response than we would have expected based on past experiences in helping others with these same situations. And I think it's reflective of--well, first of all, again, the strong relationship that we enjoyed and have enjoyed with Japan that made it very easy to integrate from a leadership perspective. And that translated to focused activities that could get right to the problem in a synchronized manner. But, the other aspect is the energy, ingenuity, commitment, courage of the Japanese people in dealing with this problem.

But, having said that, we'll continue to assess, along with the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, how much and how long the US military assistance may be required. I would invite others outside military channels--I will say anecdotally that I expect that US support will continue for some time beyond the military support. But, as long as our support is required, then we will be supporting it.

And to the question of risks that we may be taking with respect to the forces that we have committed to supporting Operation Tomodachi, I think that goes to the addressing of the comments on and concerns about the capacity of the US government in general and the military in particular in supporting operations in Central Command and now in Libya. I think that we really do have a lot of capacity and margin that some have come to the view that we didn't have.

The Joint Force is a very flexible force, I think as we have demonstrated in responding to the current world events. And we still have capacity yet. We still continue to pursue our exercise program.

And if something were to occur untoward somewhere else in the world, I'm confident that we have the capacity. We may have to diminish our exercise activity, but we certainly have the capacity to focus on those areas that may have national interest.

Dr. Rich Ellings: I know that perhaps motivating that question have been in--over the last years and more recent times events precipitated by North Korean actions, not to mention other things going on in the region. I assume that's the gist of that question. And thank you so much for responding.

Another question out there? Admiral, I have one, a question. How many total troops, approximately, and sailors do we have that are dedicated to Tomodachi, both in the region, and I know there at the command you're--you've got a whole group there. But, how many people are we talking about who are helping out the Japanese Self-Defense Forces?

Rear Admiral Scott Swift: Let me start off with framing the forces that report for duty every morning to Admiral Willard. There's over 325,000 sailors, soldiers, airmen, marines, and coastguardsmen that are assigned to the Pacific Command. Now, we support CENTCOM with a portion of those forces. But, again, it speaks to the depth of capacity that the US military has to apply globally.

Specifically to your question, DOD is supporting Operation Tomodachi with approximately 15,000 personnel. The DOD service members, when we talk of those that are assigned across the broader region specific to Japan, it's upwards of 55,000 total. So, there's a significant number that are committed to it.

From a resource perspective, there is the--there is over 22 ships, 140 aircraft that are committed as well. So, it's a significant force. I think I mentioned earlier two carrier strike groups and an amphibious ready group committed as well.

Dr. Rich Ellings: Okay.

Well, thank you so much. And I know, on behalf of everyone here and our Japanese friends, we are just so appreciative of everything you're doing.

And I--it's hard for us to understand that this is a normal hour for you to be up. But--and so, we're not going to believe you completely. But, I hope it's not true. But, in any case, thank you so much for calling in at this very early hour out there. And again, we appreciate everything you're doing.

Rear Admiral Scott Swift: Thank you [unintelligible].