



U.S. To Continue Help in Venezuela

By STEVEN GUTKIN
Associated Press Writer

JANUARY 19, 22:48 EST

TANAGUARENA, Venezuela (AP) — The United States will keep helping victims of Venezuela's deadly floods despite President Hugo Chavez's recent decision to reject hundreds of American military engineers, the U.S. ambassador to Venezuela said Wednesday.

“We are moving ahead. There is work to be done. Relations are good,” Ambassador John Maisto told The Associated Press during a helicopter tour of the coastal zone most heavily damaged by last month's massive flooding and landslides that killed as many as 30,000 people.

Nevertheless, the U.S. relief effort is less ambitious than it would have been had the army engineers been allowed to come. There are about 120 U.S. soldiers in Venezuela whose main mission is to help provide clean drinking water to survivors.

Some 450 Marine and Navy engineers had been expected to help rebuild the coastal road, an essential link for the region's transportation and commerce. But after Chavez said last week that he did not want the American soldiers in his country, U.S. officials ordered a U.S. Navy ship that was en route to Venezuela to reverse course.

U.S. officials said they were dismayed by Chavez's announcement, since Venezuela's defense minister had requested the help in a letter on Dec. 24.

Ambassador Maisto toured the disaster area — a swath of coastal communities just north of the capital of Caracas — on a U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopter.

The United States is playing a major role in purifying water from the ocean and contaminated rivers to give to mudslide survivors. Eighteen machines — half from the U.S. Army and half from a private firm contracted by the U.S. government — are purifying some 500,000 gallons of water a day. The firm, Tempest Environmental Systems of Durham, North Carolina, sent a team of water specialists to Venezuela on Christmas Eve to coordinate the relief efforts.

Other countries, including Israel, France, Uruguay and Spain, have brought their own water purification machines to Vargas state, where massive avalanches of mud and water on Dec. 15 came crashing down the mountain that separates Caracas from the Caribbean Sea. Unlike the Americans, however, these systems have had minimal success on Venezuela's muddy waters.

Also Wednesday, Foreign Minister Jose Vicente Rangel said Venezuela has asked the Organization of American States to investigate allegations of human rights abuses during the floods.

In the aftermath of the mudslides, several human rights groups accused security agents of killing and mistreating citizens in an apparent effort to control widespread looting. An Associated Press reporter on the scene also saw National Guardsmen beating accused looters.

Rangel sent a letter Tuesday to OAS chief Cesar Gaviria asking for support in ``analyzing the denunciations." For the President Chavez, the letter said, ``the topic of human rights is vital."

But Chavez recently called the allegations by one human rights watchdog group, Provea, ``suspicious and superficial." And during his nationally broadcast radio program last Sunday, he attacked a series of articles by local journalist Vanessa Davies, who witnessed the National Guardsmen's abuses alongside the AP reporter.

The catastrophe took on new dimensions from the vantage point of a helicopter. Where entire communities of homes, schools and shops once stood, there is now nothing but strewn boulders and tree trunks.

In the devastated town of Caraballeda, housewife Josefina Rodriguez, 50, said she was grateful to the United States for providing drinking water to her family, and criticized Chavez's decision to reject the U.S. military engineers.

``This was help for the state of Vargas," she said. ``I don't know why Chavez sent them away."

U.S. volunteers and soldiers interviewed Wednesday said that continuing rains were hampering relief efforts, and that the possibility of further catastrophes was a concern.

In the coastal city of Tanaguarena, U.S. soldiers were forced to move water purifying machines after heavy rains this week caused a river to change course. The nine U.S. Tempest systems in the region remained operational.