

World Food Programme ups aid to Myanmar

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Yangon - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) on Wednesday announced plans to increase its food assistance this year to marginalized communities in Myanmar, including returnee Rohingya Muslims in the North Rakhine State. The WFP claimed recent breakthroughs in winning permission from Myanmar's junta to supply food to returning Rohingya Muslim refugees in the North Rakhine State and to Kachin communities in the north.

"The easing of bureaucratic procedures in North Rakhine State by the Area Commander is an initiative we hope will be replicated elsewhere," said Chris Kaye, WFP's country director in Yangon.

Rohinga Muslims are one of several ethnic minorities that have suffered persecution at the hands of Myanmar's military government in the past. Tens of thousands of Rohingas have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh over the past two decades as a result of government policies to drive them out of cities and off their land.

Those who have returned from Bangladesh reportedly face tremendous hardships finding work and feeding their families.

The WFP also expects to expand its operations in 2008 to assist impoverished communities in eastern Kachin State, another hotspot for past repression.

"A critical element that will ensure food can be delivered to these communities is the government's agreement for WFP to partner with a number of Non-Governmental Organizations," noted Kaye.

"Discussions with the government to expand our operations with our NGO partners have been positive and I am confident that we will be able to deliver food assistance in these areas in early 2008 providing we continue to receive donor support," he added.

WFP is one of the few organizations actively providing aid to Myanmar, a pariah state among Western democracies because of its poor human rights record, refusal to initiate democratic reforms and recent history of brutal crackdowns on its own people.

WFP's emergency food assistance program in Myanmar has spent 51.7 million dollars over the past three years, providing emergency food to some 1.6 million people, including former opium growers and victims of HIV/AIDS and TB.

Donors to WFP's protracted relief and recovery operation in Myanmar include Australia (5.1 million dollars), European Union (2.4 million), The United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (1.4 million), Japan (1.1 million), Finland (1.4), The Germany (1.0 million), Switzerland (870,000), Denmark (750,000), The United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (648,000), Norway (546,000) New Zealand (437,000), the United States (300,000), Flemish (221,000) Italy (140,000) and Estonia (46,000).

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