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HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

Project Evaluations and Better Information Sharing Needed to Manage the Military's Efforts

Why GAO Did This Study

In recent years, the Department of Defense (DOD) has increased its emphasis and spending on humanitarian assistance efforts outside of war and disaster environments. From fiscal years 2005 through 2010, DOD obligated about $383 million on its key humanitarian assistance programs. Because civilian agencies, such as the Department of State and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) also carry out many assistance efforts, DOD's efforts require close collaboration with these agencies. This report was conducted as part of GAO's response to a statutory mandate and reviewed (1) DOD's management of two key humanitarian assistance programs—the humanitarian assistance program funded through its Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) appropriation and its Humanitarian and Civic Assistance program—and (2) the extent to which DOD, State, and USAID have visibility over each others' efforts. To conduct this review, GAO analyzed funding and program information, and interviewed officials at DOD, State, USAID, nongovernment organizations, and 12 U.S. embassies.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD update its humanitarian assistance program guidance, improve data management, and conduct project evaluations, and that DOD, State, and USAID improve information sharing. GAO also suggests that Congress consider clarifying DOD's role in humanitarian assistance efforts. DOD partially agreed with the recommendations, and State and USAID agreed with the recommendations addressed to them.

View GAO-12-359. For more information, contact John Pendleton at (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense's (DOD) management of its key humanitarian assistance programs reflects both positive practices and weaknesses:

- **Alignment with strategic goals.** DOD aligns its humanitarian assistance project planning with the goals outlined in U.S. and departmental strategies, and has clearly established processes for implementing its projects.
- **Interagency project coordination.** DOD has taken steps to coordinate with the Department of State (State) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on projects, such as seeking concurrence on project proposals and embedding representatives from their agencies at its combatant commands, but coordination challenges remain.
- **Poor data management.** DOD does not have complete information on the status or actual costs of the full range of its Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) projects. In addition, Humanitarian and Civic Assistance project data in DOD's database differ from what DOD reports to Congress.
- **Limited program evaluations.** From fiscal years 2005 through 2009, DOD had not completed 90 percent of the required 1-year post-project evaluations for its OHDACA projects, and about half of the required 30-day evaluations for those projects, and thus lacks information to determine projects' effects.
- **Limited program guidance.** DOD's primary guidance for the OHDACA humanitarian assistance program is limited, is not readily accessible to all DOD personnel, and has not been updated for several years.

Furthermore, DOD, State, and USAID do not have full visibility over each others' assistance efforts, which could result in a fragmented approach to U.S. assistance. There are several initiatives under way to improve information sharing, including one directed by the National Security Council. However, no framework, such as a common database, currently exists for the agencies to readily access information on each others' efforts. Moreover, the potential for overlap exists among agencies' efforts in four areas: (1) health, (2) education, (3) infrastructure, and (4) disaster preparation. For example, both USAID and DOD are conducting health care projects in Yemen and building schools in Azerbaijan. Overlap may be appropriate in some instances, especially if agencies can leverage each others' efforts. However, given the agencies' information-sharing challenges, there are questions as to whether DOD's efforts are an efficient use of resources since USAID serves as the lead U.S. development agency. State and USAID officials said that DOD's humanitarian assistance efforts can be beneficial, especially when responding to disasters or supporting foreign militaries. However, officials said DOD's efforts can have negative political effects, particularly in fragile communities where even small gestures, such as distributing soccer balls to a particular population, can be interpreted as exhibiting favoritism. While DOD's funding for humanitarian assistance is small relative to the billions spent by State and USAID, its programs are expanding. Given interagency information challenges, the fiscally-constrained environment, and the similarity of agencies' assistance efforts, DOD and the other agencies involved in foreign assistance could benefit from additional direction from Congress on DOD's role in performing humanitarian assistance in peacetime environments.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**