

Clinton in Brazil After Pledging Long Term Earthquake Aid to Chile

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Photo: AP

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrives in Brasilia, 02

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is in Brasilia for meetings with Brazilian leaders after a stop in Chile where she pledged long-term U.S. relief help for the earthquake-ravaged country. Chilean officials say damage estimates range into the tens of billions of dollars.

Clinton spent only a few hours on the ground at the Santiago airport, meeting with President Michelle Bachelet and President elect Sebastian Pinera, and delivering an initial installment of 25 badly needed satellite telephones.

But she promised that the United States intends to be responsive to Chilean requests for a list of emergency items, including mobile surgical units and water purification systems, and said that the American commitment to Chile will be long-term.

"So we stand ready to offer what we've asked for now and to stay as your partner and your friend for the long term," said Hillary Clinton. "We'll be there to be of help when others leave, because we are committed to this partnership and friendship with Chile."

President Bachelet said the earthquake - one of the most powerful ever recorded - damaged a half million homes and affected the lives of two million Chileans though the monetary costs of recovery at this point, are hard to calculate.

"I could not answer for you how much it would cost to rebuild, to reconstruct, all this damage," said Michelle Bachelet. "But I can only say, it will be a lot. Chile has the capacity, we have the engineers, we have the people, we have the experience, we have people trained and all that. But I think it will take long, and it will mean a whole amount of money."

Ms. Bachelet said that Chile, which runs budget and trade surpluses, may be able to obtain reconstruction loans at favorable rates from the World Bank and other institutions, though that would be a decision for the incoming Pinera administration to make.

Pinera, who is to be sworn into office next week, estimated earthquake damage at \$30 billion - 15 per cent of Chile's annual economic output.

But he said the disaster need not cause a rollback in his campaign pledges for job creation and a six per cent annual economic growth rate, given that the rebuilding process will be labor intensive.

He said it was not the time to criticize the leftist government's handling of the crisis.

But Pinera lamented looting and vandalism that have occurred in some areas including in Chile's second-largest city Concepcion, which was hardest hit by the earthquake.

"This is absolutely unacceptable," said Sebastian Pinera. "It simply worsens the already catastrophic situation that we're in. I hope that the government was using all the tools necessary in order to combat crime and to restore order. If more troops, if more people are needed, they should be used."

Pinera, of Chile's right-leaning National Renewal Party, said he might extend the national state of catastrophe declared by President Bachelet to allow for a continued military role in relief efforts.

Clinton, under questioning, said while Chile requires military-related hardware like portable

bridges to meet earthquake needs, the idea of sending U.S. military personnel to Chile is not under discussion.

The Secretary of State has talks here Wednesday with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva on, among other things potential new U.N. Security Council sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program. Brazil, which has extensive relations with Iran, is a current Security Council member.