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## U.S. aid unlikely to reverse diplomatic woes

**Relief to Chile won't reverse Washington's poor standing in Latin America, as recent aid efforts have elsewhere, experts say.**

By Paul Richter

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Reporting from Washington

The U.S. aid that poured into Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami paid handsome dividends for its donor, polishing America's image and leading some government officials to view disaster relief as a pillar of public diplomacy in a wary world.

But as the U.S. gears up to help earthquake-ravaged Chile, it appears any public relations benefit from the effort will be more modest.

Latin American diplomats and private experts say that although Chileans will respond with gratitude, the larger region's strained ties with the Obama administration are unlikely to improve.

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"It will help marginally, and temporarily," said Michael Shifter, vice president for policy and director of the Andean program at the Inter-American Dialogue. "It's not going to solve the problems just now between the United States and the region."

The region "expects a certain amount of aid from the United States and the wealthy countries," said one diplomat from a generally pro-American country who spoke on condition of anonymity. "People are grateful. But will it change their foreign policy? No."

The tens of millions of dollars U.S. officials have poured into Haiti since its devastating earthquake Jan. 12 have been a plus for the United States, Shifter said. Yet the region's complicated feelings about the United States have also been clear. Some Latin American officials, as well as some Haitian leaders, complained about the "militarization" of the U.S. aid effort, he said.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez denounced the Pentagon's Haitian presence as an "invasion," and commentators on social networking websites echoed some of the same feelings.

"This is a region that has been, and remains, very sensitive about the activities of the U.S. military," Shifter said.

The Obama administration began its term amid warm feelings and high expectations from Latin America, sentiments that were apparent when President Obama traveled to the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago last spring. But in the intervening year, many governments in the region have begun to feel that the new team has not lived up to its promise.

Initiatives outlined by Obama, such as a joint energy effort, have made little progress. Many Latin American leaders were frustrated by the protracted American effort to address the aftermath of the June coup in Honduras, which ended with the election of a right-leaning president that many countries have only gradually accepted.

And those who expected Obama to finally end the economic embargo on Cuba have been frustrated by his caution; he, like his predecessor, has insisted that the Cuban government first undertake political reforms.

"There has been disappointment," said Juan Carlos Hidalgo, a specialist on Latin America at the Cato Institute in Washington. "People were waiting for Obama to live up to expectations that I don't think were ever realistic. But that was their attitude."

Chileans who benefit from the administration's aid may feel better about the U.S., but "elsewhere, I don't think much will change," Hidalgo said.

U.S. disaster relief efforts have brought dramatic improvements in U.S. standing elsewhere. In the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, the share of Indonesians with positive views of the U.S. rose into the 30% range, up from about 20%, said Andrew Kohut, president of the Pew Research Center.

U.S. aid to Pakistan after a 2005 earthquake raised pro-American sentiment there by at least 5 percentage points, he said. "This is pretty remarkable for a country where there's such strong anti-Americanism," Kohut said.

Although many Chileans resented the U.S. for backing Augusto Pinochet, the dictator who ruled the country from 1973 to 1990, ties with Chile have been among the strongest in the region for the U.S. recently.

It remains unclear whether the level of U.S. aid to Chile will come anywhere near what was provided for Haiti or Indonesia.

Haiti asked for a wholesale rebuilding program. But more prosperous Chile by Tuesday had requested only limited aid, including 20 satellite phones, a portable hospital and a water purification system.

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