

**The gutting of U.S.A.I.D. is likely to hinder recovery efforts in Myanmar.** By Tim Balk,  
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In the past, the U.S. Agency for International Development mobilized major relief responses after earthquakes. Not this time.

A powerful earthquake that has killed more than 1,600 people in Myanmar comes as the Trump administration is dismantling the main U.S. agency for distributing foreign aid, a step that is likely to inhibit recovery efforts in the isolated Asian country.

As the 7.7-magnitude earthquake [caused buildings to collapse](#), downed power lines and ripped up roads in the Mandalay region of Myanmar on Friday, the Trump administration was [detailing final plans](#) to effectively eliminate the aid organization, the U.S. Agency for International Development, by cutting its staff to about 15.

Already, the agency, which had about 10,000 employees before President Trump returned to office, has [been defunded](#), and nearly all of its foreign aid contracts have been terminated. At least 7,000 staff members have been fired or [put on leave](#). The Trump administration has been slowed in its effort to gut the agency by court battles, but an appeals court on Friday [cleared the way](#) for further cuts.

Mr. Trump said on Friday that the United States would offer aid to Myanmar, [telling reporters](#), “We’re going to be helping.” But the initial U.S. response has been muted.

Other countries, including China and India, have begun sending food, blankets and search teams to Myanmar, where modeling by the U.S. Geological Survey suggests [the number of deaths is likely to surpass 10,000](#). But Myanmar’s government, controlled by a junta that overthrew the country’s elected government in 2021, is under heavy sanctions from the United States, Britain and others, and its isolation is expected to complicate the global response.

In the past, the United States would “almost invariably” have sent search teams and released money to nonprofit organizations to aid survivors, said Jeremy Konyndyk, a former director of U.S.A.I.D.’s foreign disaster assistance office.

“The first 24 to 48 hours after a major disaster are the time of peak frenzy, because that’s when you’re getting the search-and-rescue teams spun up and organizing the airlifts,” Mr. Konyndyk said. “But none of that’s happening.”

Instead, on Friday, workers who remained at U.S.A.I.D. received messages informing them of their [“final mission”](#) and detailing the further elimination of jobs.

The Trump administration says it will keep a small group of essential staff members in U.S.A.I.D. under the umbrella of the State Department. A message sent to workers on Saturday asked them to indicate their “preferred status during the transition.”

After the earthquake, the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance at U.S.A.I.D. released a formal declaration of humanitarian needs in Myanmar, according to a copy of the document reviewed by The New York Times.

The declaration said that U.S.A.I.D. was “in communication with its international human partners” and that a three-person U.S. “assessment team” was prepared to travel to Myanmar.

The declaration did not appear to have been published online — U.S.A.I.D.’s website has been [stripped down to a notification](#) that staff members are on leave — and the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance did not immediately reply to a request for comment on Saturday.

“I’d love to see them pull back the teams that they’ve fired and really mount a serious response” to the earthquake, Mr. Konyndyk said. But he added, “The fact that they fired everyone on the day this was all going on does not suggest there’s much seriousness about a real U.S. response.”

U.S. rescue teams have traditionally provided not only sophisticated equipment, but also expertise to assist local teams on search methods, Mr. Konyndyk said.

“When the donor that normally provides about 40 percent of global humanitarian financing leaves the field, no one else can really fill that gap,” he said, referring to America’s role in global relief efforts. “The absence of the U.S. here is going to mean fewer live rescues of people who could be saved. Full stop.”

David Pierson contributed reporting.