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Haiti: UN-backed quake relief operations expand beyond devastated capital



Haitians in Léogâne receive food bags

21 January 2010 – United Nations-supported relief efforts to reach the countless victims of Haiti's devastating earthquake are expanding to areas away from Port-au-Prince, the capital, to smaller towns and communities as aid agencies struggle to ramp up their operations to meet the enormity of the task.

In Léogâne, UN peacekeepers from Sri Lanka are providing security while food is being distributed for some of the nearly 200,000 residents of the town, 18 miles (29 kilometres) west of the capital of the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, the UN mission in Haiti (**MINUSTAH**) reported today.

A mountain of flattened concrete now rises where a university was under construction, the rubble of destroyed houses piles high along the lanes while others teeter precariously to one side, ready to crumble at the next aftershock, like the tremor, measuring 5.9 on the Richter scale, which rocked the area yesterday.

That aftershock occurred eight days after the original quake measuring 7.0, which according to some estimates killed up to 200,000 people, injured many others and affected 3 million people, a third of the total population.

UN agencies in the town such as the World Food Programme (**WFP**), government bodies like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the French Agence française de Coopération Technique et de Développement (ACTED), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as CARE and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), are distributing health kits and jerry cans as well as food.

WFP Executive Director Josette Sheeran began a two-day visit to Haiti today to assess the situation, visit those affected and meet with Government and relief agency officials.

But relief operations in Léogâne seem to reflect the continuing inability noted elsewhere to meet all the pressing needs of the catastrophic disaster. Town mayor Alexis Santos underlined "the insufficiency in relation to the number of people in need and the difficulty of reaching the neediest and the injured," and NGO centres have been stormed by thousands of impatient survivors. Medical teams from Canada and Argentina have so far treated 600 people.

The Canadian military will install a field hospital with 50 beds within the next two days and the Japanese Government has already set up a similar medical facility.

UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes highlighted the general difficulties in responding to such a vast catastrophe yesterday when he told a **news briefing** in New York that the world body was doing all it could to ramp up relief efforts but still had a very long way to go.

"We're straining every nerve again to make sure that there are the right number of doctors, the right amount of drugs and equipment and field hospitals," he said, voicing deep concern at the very large number of injured who may be infected or waiting for urgent surgical treatment. "We're hoping that we'll be able to turn a corner there very soon."

At another news briefing today he cited the "incredible international response and incredible outpouring of generosity and solidarity" with Haiti. "If we have [logistical] problems at the airport, in some respects, it's because so many people, so many planes want to get in there bringing aid literally from all round the world."

Noting the UN mandate to coordinate the relief, he praised the extremely close cooperation from all the countries, agencies and NGOs involved. "Of course it's a frustrating business; it's never as fast as we would like, the logistical problems, the problems of chaos on the first few days took some overcoming, but I'm confident that we're getting there..."

"This is a massive international effort. It will continue to be a massive international effort," he concluded.

MINUSTAH meanwhile has welcomed the Dominican Republic's Government's assistance in establishing a humanitarian corridor linking Santo Domingo and Port-au-Prince, allowing speedy delivery of urgently needed aid. The Dominican Republic is sending 150 military soldiers to help protect the corridor and has already dispatched military field hospitals, humanitarian aid, food rations and rescue teams.

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