

Haiti Airport Overwhelmed Amid Fears for Survivors (Update1)

By Peter S. Green and Michelle Fay Cortez



Jan. 15 (Bloomberg) -- Rescuers from around the world overwhelmed Haiti's only international airport amid fears aid isn't reaching survivors of the Jan. 12 earthquake that the country's Red Cross says may have killed 50,000 people.

With little time left to find those still buried in the rubble, rescue teams were stuck at the Port-au-Prince airport and civilian relief flights couldn't land after its ramps filled with craft, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration said in a notice. The airport also lacked fuel for planes to fly home.

"In the first 48 hours, you have to find people who are injured and buried under these stone heaps," Dr. Egbert Sondorp of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine said. "Emergency measures are helpful only for the first few days. After that, most people will be dead."

The quake also damaged roads from the neighboring Dominican Republic, said Harry Edwards, a spokesman for the U.S. Agency for International Development, while the U.S. Coast Guard said cargo docks in Port-au-Prince were unusable.

"There is a substantial shortage of water, food, medical supplies and shelter in the country," former U.S. President Bill Clinton said on CNBC television this morning. "There's still a lot of these medical clinics that don't even have aspirin and other basic medical supplies."

Cuban Airspace

Dominican President Leonel Fernandez offered his country's ports and airports as a staging ground for aid in a meeting with Haitian President Rene Preval, according to the Dominican presidential Web site. The U.S. received permission to use Cuban airspace for medical flights to and from the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, saving 90 minutes on a one-way flight, White House spokesman Tommy Vietor said today.

"The fact that the system is overloaded spells trouble even for people with moderate injuries," who risk infection if they go untreated, said Irwin Redlener, director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health.

Government workers in Haiti began digging mass graves and burying 7,000 victims of the quake, the Miami Herald reported.

Amid Haiti's dry season, the weather today is forecast to be partly cloudy with a high of 31 degrees Celsius (88 degrees Fahrenheit), according to AccuWeather.com.

Jan Techau, an analyst at Berlin's German Council on Foreign Relations, said the North Atlantic Treaty Organization might be called in to assist Haiti, just as it helped after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

NATO Assets

"NATO could use its assets to help with logistics and humanitarian relief including ships and helicopters," Techau said in an interview. A NATO spokesman in Brussels wasn't immediately able to say whether the alliance had received any requests for aid.

International Medical Corps, a non-profit group based in Santa Monica, California, is bringing in its own supplies, said Margaret Aguirre, a spokeswoman for its emergency response team, in a telephone interview from the Haitian capital.

"So much of the infrastructure is lost in terms of buildings and personnel," she said. "A lot of the people who normally do relief work are missing themselves."

A hospital ship from the U.S. is on the way. Helicopters are already ferrying the wounded to hospitals in nearby countries.

"Even as we move as quickly as possible, it will take hours -- and in many cases days -- to get all of our people and resources on the ground," President Barack Obama said. "Right now in Haiti roads are impassable, the main port is badly

damaged, communications are just beginning to come online.”

82nd Airborne

The U.S. has deployed an advance unit of the Army's 82nd Airborne division. The aircraft carrier U.S.S. Carl Vinson will arrive today, and a U.S. Marine expeditionary force is approaching the island.

“This is a moment for American leadership,” Obama said in a meeting with House Democrats on Capitol Hill. He said U.S. power must be projected “not just for our own interest, but for the interest of the world as a whole.”

He pledged \$100 million for relief efforts.

Economic damage in Haiti may be in the “low-single-digit billions” of dollars, Eqecat Inc., an Oakland, California-based company that builds financial risk models for insurers, said in a statement.

The earthquake will cost Haiti at least 15 percent of its \$7 billion gross domestic product, Pamela Cox, the World Bank's vice president for Latin America and the Caribbean, said in an interview with Bloomberg Television.

Canceling Debt

French Finance Minister Christine Lagarde said in Paris today that as head of the Paris Club she's contacted other members to cancel Haiti's bilateral debt with France.

More than two days after the magnitude-7.0 tremor hit the capital, destroying homes, hospitals, schools and such landmarks as the presidential palace and national cathedral, thousands of people were wandering the city's streets or trying to dig out those trapped.

“Bodies being dragged out of the rubble and placed on sidewalks, out in the open, every few meters there are bodies; bodies everywhere; numerous bodies of children; the smell of decaying bodies is starting to come already,” Kristie van de Wetering, communications director in Haiti for aid agency CHF International, wrote in an e-mail.

Trapped Boy

“We met the father of a 15-year-old boy who was trapped under the rubble,” she wrote. “They could hear him tapping with a rock so they knew he was still alive; the family was looking for tools to get him out.”

More urgent than disposing of corpses is setting up water stations and temporary

treatment centers and delivering the tons of antibiotics and supplies needed to avert outbreaks of diarrhea, measles and malaria, said Thomas Kirsch, an emergency medicine specialist at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore.

The Haitian Red Cross estimated that as many as 50,000 people died in the quake, National Public Radio reported. Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive said Jan. 13 that the death toll could reach 100,000.

The situation is “hopeless” for many Haitians, and aid efforts aren’t yet providing significant help, David Wimhurst, communications director of the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti, told reporters in New York via videoconference.

Angry, Impatient

“They are slowly getting more angry and impatient,” Wimhurst said. “The situation is getting more tense. Tempers might become frayed. The national police have disappeared. Law and order is up to the UN.”

People are sleeping in the streets and obstructing roads with concrete blocks, making it difficult for aid workers to move, he said.

“You can only step over the bodies of the wounded and the dead in the dark so long before these tensions mount up,” former President Clinton said. He said people can help by sending money to charitable groups.

Haitians in the U.S. should be allowed to overstay their visas, said Sen. Richard Lugar, and be granted Temporary Protective Status for 18 months so they can send funds home. Yesterday, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement said it suspended deportations of Haitians.

A private rescue team, assembled by Citigroup Inc., arrived by helicopter in Port-au-Prince and pulled two employees from the wreckage of the bank’s three-story office. More may be trapped inside, Liliana Mejia, a spokeswoman for the New York-based bank said today.

Food Rations

The World Food Program plans to ship ready-to-eat rations for 2 million people, and had enough on hand this morning for 2,400 people, said spokeswoman Bettina Luescher.

Spain, Russia, Germany, Chile and Israel sent field hospitals by air. Poland, Ireland, Canada the U.K., Iceland and Brazil sent rescue workers, as did several U.S. cities, including 80 firefighters and police from New York City.

Donations came from corporations including Jefferies Group Inc., Morgan Stanley, Bank of America and Goldman Sachs Group Inc., which each pledged at least \$1 million for relief efforts. Citigroup pledged \$2 million, and Digicel Group, Haiti's largest mobile phone provider, pledged \$5 million.

"What touched us was the hopelessness of the situation and devastation," said Bob Parsons, chief executive of Go Daddy Group, a Scottsdale, Arizona, Web site design and registration firm. Go Daddy gave \$500,000 to Hope for Haiti, a nonprofit organization that supports education and health care.

Officials along Haiti's border with the Dominican Republic are letting Haitians cross freely, waiving visas and noting only names, said Sandra Severino, a spokeswoman for President Fernandez.

"We're opening our border to the injured," Severino said in a phone interview from Santo Domingo. "In Haiti there are no conditions for anything."

A Dominican convoy was the first foreign aid to enter Haiti yesterday, bringing 300 rescue workers, dogs and a fleet of excavators.

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