

January 15, 2010

## Tensions Mount in Devastated Capital as Nations Step Up Aid Pledges to Haiti

By *MARC LACEY*

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — The distance between life and death narrowed in this flattened city on Thursday, with survival two days after the huge earthquake struck depending increasingly on the luck of being freed from under rubble, on treating the thousands of wounded and on speeding the halting flow of emergency food and water.

“Get me out!” came the haunting voice of a teenager, Jhon Verpre Markenley, from a dark crevice of the trade school that collapsed around him and fellow students.

Mr. Verpre’s father risked his own life to save his son’s, crouching deep into the hole with a blowtorch to try to wear away the metal that had his son’s leg pinned down inside. Hours later, the young man was free. His mother danced.

By Thursday evening, the Haitian president, René Préval, said that 7,000 people had already been buried in a mass grave. Hundreds of corpses piled up outside the city’s morgue, next to a hospital struggling to prevent those numbers from rising. On street corners, people pulled their shirts up over their faces to filter out the thickening smell of the dead.

With reports of looting and scuffles over water and food, President Obama promised \$100 million in aid, as the first wave of a projected 5,000 American troops began arriving to provide security and the infrastructure for the expected flood of aid from around the world.

“You will not be forsaken, you will not be forgotten,” Mr. Obama told the Haitian people in an emotional address at the White House on Thursday. “In this, your hour of greatest need, America stands with you.”

Help was only beginning to arrive Thursday as the United States military took over the wrecked air traffic control system to land cargo planes with food and water, though the airport was clogged and chaotic with little or no fuel for planes

to return. Doctors and search-and-rescue teams worked mostly with the few materials in hand and waited, frustrated, for more supplies, especially much needed heavy equipment.

“Where’s the response?” asked Eduardo A. Fierro, a structural engineer from California who had arrived earlier in the day to inspect quake-damaged buildings. “You can’t do anything about the dead bodies, but inside many of these buildings people may still be alive. And their time is running out.”

United Nations officials said that Haitians were growing hopeless — and beginning to run out of patience.

“They are slowly getting more angry,” said David Winhurst, the spokesman for the United Nations mission in Haiti, speaking by video link from the Port-au-Prince airport. “We are all aware of the fact that the situation is getting more tense.”

The Haitian National Police had virtually disappeared, Mr. Winhurst and another senior United Nations official said, and no longer had a presence on the streets, though witnesses at the city’s already filled main morgue reported seeing police pickup trucks dropping off bodies collected from around the city.

The United Nations officials said that the 3,000 peacekeeping troops around the capital would probably be sufficient to handle any unrest, but that plans were being made to bring in reinforcements from the 6,000 others scattered around the country.

The struggle to survive intensified Thursday, in dramas that played out around this city that has already suffered more than most, from centuries of poverty, violence and natural disaster. Despite the strength of the magnitude 7.0 earthquake, the United Nations reported that the damage, in fact, appeared to be confined to the capital and a few outlying areas, with the rest of the country largely spared.

Ronald Jedna, covered in white dust atop a damaged building, had just been freed, after spending a day caught in a crevice of his apartment building with heavy beams pressing in tight against his chest.

He said he tried to cry out but his throat was too dry and he was too weak. Only a whisper would come out. Eventually, though, a neighbor peered through a tiny slit, discovered him and managed to pry him loose.

“A day felt like a year,” he said. “You’re buried alive. You can’t scream. You wonder if anyone will ever come.”

Mr. Jedna had a deep, untreated wound in his shin. He stood atop the rubble looking for others who might still be breathing.

The United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, described another “small miracle during a night which brought few other miracles.” An Estonian bodyguard named Tarmo Joveer was recovered, virtually unscathed, from beneath 13 feet of debris at the United Nations offices at the Christopher Hotel on Thursday morning, where 100 more of the organization’s workers remained buried inside. Rescuers found him with the help of electronic sensors and dogs brought in by the American, Chinese and French teams, and had helped keep him alive by piping him water through a tube.

But hope was fading for perhaps tens of thousands of others.

Residents interviewed through the city said that the cries that they heard emanating from many collapsed buildings in the initial hours after the quake had begun to soften, if not quiet completely.

“There’s no more life here,” said a grandmother, who nonetheless rapped a broom against concrete in hopes that her four missing relatives believed to be buried inside might somehow respond.

Pascale Valérie Lisnay, whose brother was buried in the collapsed trade school, said she longed to hear anything from him, a moan, a cry, anything to give her hope that he was still alive. Standing outside one of countless similarly horrible sites across Port-au-Prince, she dialed her brother’s cellphone number again and again, tears filling her eyes each time it failed to connect.

“He’s gone,” she said.

The United Nations said it had confirmed that 36 of its workers had been killed in the earthquake, 73 had been injured, and an additional 160 were still missing. The United Nations began an effort to send teams around to the homes of its more than 1,200 local staff members to see if they were still alive and what help they needed, the two officials said.

At the ruins of the Montana Hotel, where many United Nations workers stayed, a French rescue team had extracted three people alive and one corpse, said Mr. Winhurst, the United Nations spokesman. Once the machines come in to lift large blocks of concrete both there and around the city, the toll is expected to mount sharply.

Mr. Winhurst himself was inside the Christopher Hotel at the time the earthquake struck.

“It accelerated with extreme violence,” he said. The room was shaking so violently that he held on to avoid being thrown to the floor, praying that the pillar in his office would not topple over on him. After the shaking stopped, he navigated down three stories on a rickety ladder.

Kim Bolduc, the chief humanitarian coordinator for the mission, said she was sitting in her second-floor office in another United Nations building when the room shook violently and a huge crack opened in the wall in front of her. “I was just hoping it would stop,” she said.

The difficulties medical workers and rescue teams faced drew anguish far beyond Haiti’s borders. **Dr. Irwin Redlener**, a professor of pediatrics at Columbia University’s medical school who is also the director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness and the president of the **Children’s Health Fund**, said he feared for the children of Port-au-Prince.

“Something like 40 to 50 percent of the population of Port-au-Prince is kids,” he said. “Kids are much more fragile — a 30-pound block of a wall that would only seriously injure an adult will kill a child. They die much more rapidly of dehydration, of loss of blood, of shock. An infection will cause explosive diarrhea, which can kill a trapped child. Everything about this is devastatingly worse for kids than for adults.

“There’s a 72-hour window for getting people out of rubble before you have a huge increase in fatalities,” he said. “We’re already at 48 hours, and I’m seeing on TV locals with a shovel trying to free a child and debating whether they would have to amputate the leg themselves. Where are the search-and-rescue workers? Where are the medical teams?”

*Reporting was contributed by Neil MacFarquhar from the United Nations, Damien Cave from Port-au-Prince, Donald G. McNeil Jr. from New York, and Ginger Thompson, Elisabeth Bumiller, Helene Cooper and Brian Knowlton from Washington.*