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By Ken Dilanian, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — President Obama promised \$100 million or more in rapid earthquake aid for Haiti on Thursday as the government sought to speed American troops and supplies to an increasingly desperate populace.

U.S. special operations forces secured the airport in the capital and began an airlift of urgently needed medicine, water and other essentials in what Obama called "one of the largest relief efforts in our recent history."

One hundred paratroopers from the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division arrived Thursday, two days after a magnitude-7 earthquake killed 45,000 to 50,000 people, according to the International Red Cross. An additional 800 of the division's soldiers are to arrive today.

By Monday, as many as 5,500 soldiers and Marines will be on the ground in Haiti or aboard ships offshore, according to the Pentagon. Up to 3,000 members of the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit will leave Camp Lejeune in North Carolina today and are expected to arrive Monday, said Capt. Clark Carpenter, a Marine spokesman.

A Navy aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, and a flotilla of other ships will arrive in Haiti today, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said. The USNS Comfort, a Navy hospital ship based in Baltimore, will arrive by next Friday. The Comfort has 12 operating rooms.

Four U.S. Coast Guard cutters worked in the waters offshore of Haiti, and the service's aircraft crews had evacuated at least 200 Americans from the island, the guard said in a statement.

Cargo planes took off for Haiti from New Jersey's Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst late Thursday afternoon packed with tents, communications gear and forklifts, said Capt. Dustin Doyle, an Air Force spokesman. The Air Force has sent a Global Hawk unmanned reconnaissance drone from its base in Northern California to assess damage, said Lt. Col. Mark Lozier of the Air Force's 12th Reconnaissance Squadron.

Leading the military response in Haiti will be Army Lt. Gen. Ken Keen, the military deputy commander of the U.S. Southern Command.

All of the aid efforts Thursday were stymied by logistical problems, including a damaged port and an overloaded airfield.

"It will take hours — and in many cases days — to get all of our people and resources on the ground," Obama said. "Right now in Haiti, roads are impassable, the main port is badly damaged, communications are just beginning to come online, and aftershocks continue. None of this will seem quick enough if you have a loved one who's trapped, if you're sleeping on the streets, if you can't feed your children."

The Red Cross has estimated 3 million people — a third of the population — may need emergency relief. Planes from China, France, Spain and the United States landed at Port-au-Prince's airport Thursday, carrying searchers and tons of water, food, medicine and other supplies. The offloading moved slowly.

It took six hours to unload a Chinese plane Wednesday because of a lack of equipment, according to the Associated Press.

Col. Brian O'Connor, commander of the 621st Contingency Response Wing at McGuire, said planes carrying aid from other countries had swamped the Port-au-Prince airport, slowing the flow.

"We could do so much more if we did it in an orderly fashion," he said. The foreign aircraft "slow us down a bit."

The 115 airmen from the 621st "will bring order" to the airport, he said.

The 621st is sending five C-17 cargo jets loaded with communications gear, freight-moving equipment and tents to house the crews. The airmen are prepared to spend several months there if necessary, he said.

Some experts praised the intensity of the U.S. effort but questioned why it wasn't bigger and faster.

"There are serious logistical barriers to getting the rescuers to the places where they can do the most good," said **Irwin Redlener**, who directs the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. "I don't know why we're not getting helicopters over there and setting down emergency equipment and supplies. We have an Airborne unit leaving today. I don't know why that didn't happen yesterday."

Haiti lacks the capacity to get more aid in faster, State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said.

"You have an airport with a single runway, so we have things that are queued up," he said. "You can't flow people before you know how you're going to be able to sustain them on the ground."

The U.S. military will be able to play a decisive role once it arrives in force in Haiti, military experts said.

"What they really want to do is get the main airfield up to full capacity," said retired general Jack Keane, the former Army vice chief of staff. "As soon as they get (a headquarters set up), a lot of things will go much more rapidly because they know how to organize this thing."

The military could drop supplies from their aircraft, said Mark Kimmitt, a retired general and former State Department official.

Besides pledging at least \$100 million, Obama enlisted former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton to raise money for Haiti relief. White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said Obama called the former presidents Wednesday to discuss their involvement. Their roles will be defined soon.

Contributing: Tom Vanden Brook, Richard Wolf; the Associated Press