

AID ARRIVES IN HAITI AS RELIEF OPERATIONS MOBILIZE

(New York, 15 January 2010): As part of its emergency response to the earthquake in Haiti, the United Nations is now delivering supplies for survivors of the earthquake as the full scale of humanitarian need becomes apparent.

The Emergency Relief Coordinator, John Holmes, warned of growing needs in the days to come and stressed the importance of coordination. “Past disaster response experience has shown that effective coordination is vital if the right help is to reach the most vulnerable in time,” he said. “If we are to meet the needs on the ground we must work together.”

Distributions of food and medical assistance have begun in Port-au-Prince, but the scale is inevitably limited so far, as aid begins to arrive. Specialist search-and-rescue teams are increasingly on the spot and have managed to locate and free some survivors. Initial assessments indicate serious damage across Port-au-Prince, with some areas suffering up to 50 percent destruction or serious damage. No figures for the dead or injured are available but they are likely to be very high.

OCHA is now coordinating more than 25 search-and-rescue teams that are now working on hospitals, schools, hotels and larger buildings. A further 13 teams are mobilizing and will receive support from the UN’s Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team at the airport.

The aid effort will increase rapidly in the coming days as the scale of need among survivors becomes clear. Dozens of countries have offered assistance, and specialist UN coordination teams are working to ensure aid quickly reaches the right people at the right time.

Immediate needs identified include medical support, food, water, and emergency shelter. Many survivors have serious injuries, including traumatic wounds, compound fractures and crushed limbs. The World Health Organization is coordinating medical assistance and sending a 12-member team specializing in victim care, while NGOs such as Medecins sans Frontiers are scaling up their efforts on the ground as quickly as possible.

OCHA is also working with the Haitian authorities on the possibility of the national soccer stadium being used as a field hospital location by international teams. The World Food Programme has begun distributions of emergency food rations that were already in country, and is moving another 86 metric tons of high-energy biscuits from El Salvador. UNICEF has flown in water purification supplies and shelter materials

UN teams are also working to overcome serious challenges to providing assistance, including lack of infrastructure and difficult logistics. Additional UN air assets are being mobilized to move aid as fast as possible through hubs now established in Port-au-Prince

and Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic.

“Disaster survivors have a right to expect assistance as soon as possible, and we have been working to get assistance to Haiti since the first hour after this earthquake,” said Mr Holmes. “The reality is that getting the quantities of supplies, equipment and expertise that are so desperately needed on the ground inevitably takes time.”

Haiti, by far the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, has been beset by natural disasters for most of its recent history. The earthquake, which measured 7.0 on the Richter scale, struck at approximately 4.53 p.m. local time on 12 January, and was less than 10km deep. It was recorded off the coast of Haiti and only 17km from the capital, Port-au-Prince. Strong aftershocks have been felt, measuring 5.9 and 5.5 respectively.

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