

'Total disaster and chaos' - huge Haiti quake

Jonathan M. Katz, Associated Press, 1-13-10

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- The Haitian capital was largely destroyed Tuesday in the most powerful earthquake to hit the country in more than 200 years. Journalists described severe and widespread casualties after a tour of the streets.

The damage was staggering, even in a country accustomed to tragedy and disaster. The National Palace is a crumbled ruin, and tens of thousands of people are homeless.

Many gravely injured people sat in the streets, pleading for doctors many hours after the 4:53 p.m. quake. In public squares, thousands of people sang hymns and held hands.

Communications were widely disrupted, making it impossible to get a full picture of the damage as powerful aftershocks shook a desperately poor country where many buildings are flimsy. Electricity was out in some places.

Karel Zelenka, a Catholic Relief Services representative in Port-au-Prince, told U.S. colleagues before phone service failed that "there must be thousands of people dead," according to a spokeswoman for the aid group, Sara Fajardo.

"He reported that it was just total disaster and chaos, that there were clouds of dust surrounding Port-au-Prince," Fajardo said from the group's offices in Maryland.

State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said in Washington that embassy personnel were "literally in the dark" after power failed.

"They reported structures down. They reported a lot of walls down. They did see a number of bodies in the street and on the sidewalk that had been hit by debris. So clearly, there's going to be serious loss of life in this," he said.

U.N. buildings damaged

Alain Le Roy, the U.N. peacekeeping chief in New York, said late Tuesday that the headquarters of the 9,000-member Haiti peacekeeping mission and other U.N. installations were seriously damaged. U.N. officials said they could not account for a large number of their personnel.

"Contacts with the U.N. on the ground have been severely hampered," Le Roy said in a statement, adding: "For the moment, a large number of personnel remain unaccounted for."

"Buildings collapsed all over the place," said Felix Augustin, Haiti's consul general in New York. "We have lives that are destroyed. ... It will take at least two or three days for people to know what's going on."

An Associated Press videographer saw the wrecked hospital in Petionville, a hillside Port-au-Prince district that is home to many diplomats and wealthy Haitians, as well as many poor people. Elsewhere in the capital, a U.S. government official reported seeing houses that had tumbled into a ravine.

Communication limited

With phones down, some of the only communication came from social media such as Twitter. Richard Morse, a well-known musician who manages the famed Olafson Hotel, kept up a stream of dispatches on the aftershocks and damage reports. The news, based mostly on second-hand reports and photos, was disturbing, with people screaming in fear and roads blocked with debris. Belair, a slum even in the best of times, was said to be "a broken mess."

The earthquake had a preliminary magnitude of 7.0 and was centered about 10 miles west of Port-au-Prince at a depth of 5 miles, the U.S. Geological Survey said. USGS geophysicist Kristin Marano called it the strongest earthquake since 1770 in what is now Haiti. In 1946, a magnitude-8.1 quake struck the Dominican Republic and also shook Haiti, producing a tsunami that killed 1,790 people.

The temblor appeared to have occurred along a strike-slip fault, where one side of a vertical fault slips horizontally past the other, said earthquake expert Tom Jordan at the University of Southern California. The earthquake's size and proximity to populated Port-au-Prince probably caused widespread casualties and structural damage, he said.

"It's going to be a real killer," he said. "Whenever something like this happens, you just hope for the best."

Most of Haiti's 9 million people are desperately poor, and after years of political instability, the country has no real construction standards. In November 2008, after the collapse of a school in Petionville, the mayor of Port-au-Prince estimated about 60 percent of the buildings were shoddily built and unsafe in normal circumstances.

Tuesday's quake was felt in the Dominican Republic, which shares a border with Haiti on the island of Hispaniola, and some panicked residents in the capital of Santo Domingo fled from their shaking homes. But no major damage was reported there.

In eastern Cuba, houses shook but there were also no reports of significant damage.

President Obama ordered U.S. officials to start preparing in case humanitarian assistance is needed.