

5.9 aftershock rocks Haitians out of their sleep

The latest temblor, centered 35 miles west-southwest of Port-au-Prince, sends people fleeing into the streets. Defense Secretary Robert Gates says the U.S. military is ramping up its relief efforts.

Tracy Wilkinson and Ken Ellingwood, Los Angeles Times, 1-20-10

Earthquake-stricken residents in Haiti were jolted from sleep this morning by a magnitude 5.9 aftershock that sent people running into the street and sowed fresh fears eight days after a catastrophic temblor.

There were no immediate reports of injuries, and it was unclear what more damage was caused by the aftershock, which hit just after 6 a.m. local time about 35 miles west-southwest of the devastated capital, Port-au-Prince, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

The USGS earlier put the magnitude of the aftershock at 6.1 but revised its estimate later in the day.

The new quake, about 6 miles deep, was the strongest of a series of aftershocks that have rattled Haiti since the 7.0 earthquake hit on Jan. 12, reducing Port-au-Prince and surrounding cities to rubble and killing tens of thousands of people.

This morning's aftershock sent people who were indoors screaming outside, news reports said. Thousands of other people have stayed outdoors since last week because their homes were ruined or they have feared new temblors.

The new quake came as the U.S. military said it was devoting more resources to the relief effort.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said during a visit to India today that he had signed orders to send a vessel equipped with cranes that would be used to clear debris from the shuttered seaport, the Associated Press reported.

The blockages prevent larger vessels from docking, causing delays in shipments of food, water and supplies because they must enter through the overtaxed airport or by land from the Dominican Republic next door.

The Pentagon also said the Comfort, a Navy hospital ship, had begun receiving patients as it steamed toward Haiti, the AP reported.

"Supplies are beginning to get out to the people," Gates told reporters traveling with him, according to Reuters. He said he hoped the presence of U.S. troops would prevent violence.

"There is a concern that if you are unable to get significant supplies out that in their desperation people will turn to crime and violence," Gates said. "We have not seen much of that yet happily, and my hope is that as we get these trucks out on the roads with supplies and people see patrols, that will prevent any significant violence from taking place."

The U.S. military has already mobilized more than 10,000 Marines, sailors and soldiers in a variety of roles: supplying food, water and medical gear; treating patients; running the Port-au-Prince airport; and helping protect humanitarian shipments.