

Haiti hit by 7.0-magnitude earthquake; buildings leveled in Port-au-Prince

William Branigin and Michael D. Shear, Washington Post, 1-13-10

The most powerful earthquake ever recorded in Haiti devastated parts of the impoverished island nation Tuesday, leveling a hospital in the capital, severely damaging the U.N. headquarters and other buildings, and sending panicked residents into the streets.

Beleaguered authorities braced for major casualties, but with communications crippled across the country, there were no firm estimates. Photos from the area showed smashed cars and people pulling victims from the rubble. The roof of the presidential palace was in pieces.

The quake, which had a preliminary magnitude of 7.0, occurred about 4:53 p.m. and was centered about 10 miles west of the capital, Port-au-Prince. Witnesses reported a series of strong aftershocks.

The United Nations said that its headquarters in Port-au-Prince, a city of 2 million people, had suffered "serious damage" and that "a large number of personnel remain unaccounted for."

"People are out in the streets, crying, screaming, shouting," said Karel Zelenka, director of the Catholic Relief Services office in Haiti. "They see the extent of the damage," he said, but could do little to rescue people trapped under rubble because night had fallen.

"There are a lot of collapsed buildings," Zelenka said in a telephone interview from Port-au-Prince. "This will be a major, major disaster."

He reported that poorly constructed shantytowns and other buildings had crumbled in huge clouds of dust. Near the CRS headquarters, a supermarket was "completely razed," he said, and a gasoline station and a church were reduced to rubble. Among the worst-hit areas was the impoverished Carrefour section of Port-au-Prince near the sea.

In the wealthier Petionville part of the city, where diplomats and well-off Haitians live in hillside homes, a hospital was wrecked and houses had tumbled into a ravine, according to the Associated Press.

President Obama issued a statement saying his "thoughts and prayers go out to those who have been affected by this earthquake."

The State Department said the United States will provide military and civilian disaster assistance to Haiti. The U.S. Agency for International Development said in a statement that it would send up to 72 workers, six search-and-rescue dogs, and up to 48 tons of rescue equipment.

State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said embassy officials had begun trying to contact Americans living in the city but were hampered by a lack of communication and by roads that were impassable.

"The damage is significant. Lots of walls down. There are people who have been killed by falling debris," Crowley said. "Clearly, the situation there, the damage there, is significant."

As of 7 p.m., Crowley said, U.S. officials had been unable to reach their Haitian counterparts in the capital.

Crowley said the State Department will continue to reach out in the hopes of offering assistance to the island nation, considered the poorest in the Western Hemisphere.

"Haiti is one of the poorest countries on Earth, and clearly the most challenged in our hemisphere," he said. "We have tried to reach out to the government of Haiti . . . but we haven't been successful. We are standing by to provide whatever assistance we can."

The World Bank, which said that its local offices were destroyed but that most staff members were accounted for, plans to send a team to help Haiti assess damage and plan a recovery, Reuters news agency reported.

In Port-au-Prince, Zelenka, the relief agency director, said that the walls of the CRS headquarters had collapsed but that the building was "only twisted" and that employees were able to get out safely. He said he hoped a contingent of more than 8,000 U.N. troops stationed in the country would be able to help by daybreak.

"Haiti is not used to earthquakes," he said. "There is no earth-moving equipment available."

Kristie van de Wetering, a former Oxfam employee still based in Port-au-Prince, described the situation as "very chaotic, with houses in rubble everywhere."

"There is a blanket of dust rising from the valley south of the capital," van de Wetering said. "We can hear people calling for help from every corner. The aftershocks are ongoing and making people very nervous."

The quake hit about the time that children would be coming home from school, and it was not immediately known whether students had made it home by then or how their houses had fared in the long and powerful temblor.

In an interview with CNN from Port-au-Prince, eyewitness Michael Bazile described panic in a severely damaged city.

"Everybody is on the street. The traffic is jammed," he said. "Everybody is yelling. They are praying. They are crying. Many houses are down. We really don't know what's going on. And every 30 minutes, we feel it again. We pray it's over, but we don't know."

The Haitian ambassador to the United States said on CNN that he had talked to a top official by cellphone moments after the quake hit the island.

"Mr. Ambassador, tell the world it is a catastrophe of major proportions," Ambassador Raymond Alcide Joseph recalled the official telling him.

Joseph said that the country's president and first lady survived the quake but that many of the government's buildings were damaged.

"These are very sturdy buildings. If those buildings are damaged, can you imagine what has happened to all these flimsy abodes" in other parts of the country? he said.

Heidi Lenzini, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Southern Command, said the military was just beginning to assess what resources it has in the region and to coordinate with the State Department on how to get the help to Haiti.

Lenzini said no official request for help had reached the U.S. military.

Conor Shapiro, a hospital administrator living in Haiti, told relatives in an e-mail that he was in Fond-des-Blancs, a small town about 90 miles west of Port-au-Prince, when the quake struck. He reported "a lot of shaking" in the town but minimal structural damage.