

SECRETARY GENERAL'S PRESS ENCOUNTER ON HAITI

14 January 2010

SG: Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to brief you, update [on what happened] over the night. The overall picture remains still sketchy and the facts, as far as we know, are grim.

On the overall casualty figures: we've all seen the varying estimates. It will take, I think, many, many days before we can make even an educated guess as to the death toll. I fear it could be very high.

Clearly, this is a major humanitarian disaster. To hear these reports of suffering, every hour, to see these terrible images on television ... it is very, very painful to all of us.

My heart goes out to all the families of victims and the Haitian people, and we will always be with them. And as Secretary-General of the United Nations, I will continuously work with the international Member States to overcome this crisis as soon as possible and bring humanitarian assistance as soon as possible and try to save as many lives as possible.

The overall security and public order is being maintained. As I told you, we have over 3,000 UN peacekeeping forces. They continue to patrol, with a chief duty being to escort and assist in distributing humanitarian relief.

Supplies are beginning to arrive by airlift. Three French cargo planes arrived yesterday, as well as one flight from Venezuela.

Rescue teams from France, China, the United States and the Dominican Republic, and many other countries, are already on the ground, with more to come.

One of the most heartening facts in this otherwise heart-breaking story is the dimension of the international response. People throughout the world want to help. One of our biggest challenges will be to help them to help Haiti to the utmost.

As I told you yesterday, the Member States of the General Assembly have responded with outpouring of support and assistance, and I have been receiving many telephone calls and letters, which expressed not only a sense of solidarity and condolence, but they have come out with all critical assets, humanitarian items, to save their lives. This is really very [gratifying] and I am very much touched by this.

Haiti will need every ounce of help we can offer.

Let me brief you about our own UN staff. The picture looks very much as it did yesterday. Approximately 150 UN staff remain unaccounted for. Roughly 100 of them were likely in the UN headquarters building, the Christopher Hotel, when it collapsed. I have seen the

image of this UN headquarter. It was terrible. Half of the Christopher Hotel had totally collapsed.

As we speak, search and rescue teams are working, using dogs and electronic sensing equipment to try to find survivors.

Early this morning, another survivor – an Estonian close protection officer named Tarmo Joveer– was located when scratching sounds were heard.

He was given water through a rubber pipe, and he was extracted from approximately four meters of rubble shortly. It was quite fortunate that he had been rescued. He was transported to the Argentine hospital. I hope he will be well soon.

It was a small miracle during a night, which brought few other miracles. We will continue to work, to search and rescue, as quickly as possible. I think the first 72 hours will be critically important. Now we are approaching 48 hours by 5:00 this afternoon. I hope that we will have more and more survivors. That is our task at this time.

So far, we know that 9 UN police officers have been injured and 4 killed. Another 18 remain missing. My Spokesperson can provide their nationalities.

Among the military, UN teams on the ground are still validating the list of the missing. The number is thought to be approximately 20. The death toll of all military and police officers stands at 22, of many nationalities. Again, my Spokesperson can provide the nationalities.

We are working closely with our international partners.

Right now, as I have said, the priority remains emergency search and rescue. People remain alive under the rubble, and we must save as many lives as we can.

The needs are huge. The needs are immediate: above all medical supplies, food, water, tents, shovels, heavy equipment.

Earlier this morning, I spoke with Ambassador Susan Rice of the United States, who will report to President [Barack] Obama on the ways in which the US administration can assist the relief effort. I have requested the US Government, I know that they are now meeting at the White House at this time, for helicopters, and engineers and medical supplies and medical items, as much as they can provide.

We will ask for transport helicopters and other critical assets, too, from many other international partners.

My acting SRSG [Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Haiti], Edmond Mulet, will arrive early this morning. I was told that by 2:00 this afternoon, he may be on the ground. He will immediately begin to work to coordinate the assistance and rescue

operations, in close coordination with the Haitian leadership, including President [René] Préval.

On a final and more personal note, to all of you: One of you asked me about the safety of [former spokesperson] Michèle Montas. She is fine. We have communicated with her. And I am very happy that she is there. I have asked my Special Representative whether she could help stay in there. My Special Representative discussed this matter with her. She can stay there and help our ongoing efforts. I hope she will.

Now, we will continue to update you regularly.

The MINUSTAH [UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti] spokesperson will speak with you through video link at noon. And John Holmes will brief you this afternoon again.

I am very grateful to all of you, the media, for your very keen interest and for communicating this worldwide. We really need your support and cooperation at this time. I am also very much gratified to many volunteers, civil society members and journalists who are on the ground, working with the United Nations and international community members to help us overcome this crisis. Thank you very much.

Q: Any update on the status of your Representative, Hédi Annabi, and Mr. [Luiz Carlos] da Costa?

SG: Unfortunately, we have not yet any confirmed news about the safety of Hédi Annabi. We will continue to do that. I hope he is okay, I hope. I sincerely, I pray for him.

Q: Which country is there with sensors, and how was the Estonian detected? And you said the work would stop at 5:00, or maybe I misunderstood you? Is that because it gets dark, or what?

SG: I will give you detailed information on which countries have provided this sensing equipment. I will get back to you later.

Q: You said that the first 72 hours are critical for trying to get survivors out of the rubble, but the numbers have really not changed very much at all from yesterday, in terms of who you have pulled out. So, is there a sense that you are beginning to lose hope that people will come out surviving or that there will be many more people rescued?

SG: We should always work for best hope. As you may know, the first search and rescue teams arrived only yesterday afternoon and evening. With a day in, now, I hope we can make much more progress during today. That is our long experience. According to our experience in past disasters like this, we have seen many survivors who are found even after many, many days later. This is our hope. So, 72 hours will be crucially important to save all those survivors.

Q: President Obama has already announced that he is dedicating \$100 million and also the IMF another \$100 million. Do you have any estimate of how much the United Nations will ask for in its Flash Appeal around this time? And what is your reaction to those figures?

SG: Tomorrow, John Holmes will issue a Flash Appeal. I hope that [former] President [Bill] Clinton will also be able to join us in that Flash Appeal. We are now trying to find out a reasonable estimate on how much would be necessary, but they are working very hard. According to John Holmes, it is very hard at this time to have an exact estimate, but we are having Friday afternoon as a target when we will be able to issue a Flash Appeal.

Q: I understand that now you are saying that the nationality of those killed will be given by the Spokesman. Yesterday it was mentioned that a Haitian national was among those who were deceased, and then in what you said yesterday evening, it wasn't mentioned. Some questions have arisen whether the numbers the UN is given actually include the Haitians that are hired, the national staff. What is the figure, or what are the procedures for checking how the actual Haitian nationals employed in various functions for the UN are faring?

SG: In saving lives, there is no difference, no distinction between international and national staff. We have 1,200 national staff employed by the United Nations [in Haiti]. There seems to be very much a difficulty in communicating with all the national staff. Some of their houses have been affected. It is very difficult to account for all the national staff. We are doing, on the same principal: that we will try to save all the lives, without any distinction.

Q: The communications situation, has that improved any? And how, with the United States sending so much aid in now, how is that being coordinated with the United Nations? Who is in charge, basically, and how is information getting around?

SG: The communication system seems to be very slowly improving. I was told that the US has their own communication line, which is still working. I was told by Ambassador [Susan] Rice that while more of their communications have been affected, they had at least one working communication line. We have a communication line working which is now located near the airport. Our staff and DPKO [Department of Peacekeeping Operations] and the crisis team are working through video conference, together with the MINUSTAH team. That is why you will be able to speak with our MINUSTAH team Spokes[person] this afternoon. So, we will try to improve, but it is related to the overall situation at this time.

Q: Does the United States answer to the UN, or is it separate efforts?

SG: I have clearly stated yesterday in my press stakeout with you and to the General Assembly Member States that all the international aid and assistance should be coordinated with MINUSTAH, the United Nations. My Special Representative, Edmond Mulet, will be the one who will be coordinating this operation.

Q: Is there any fear of the possibility of violence, and in case violence erupts, will the UN forces be enough? Is there any plan forecast to prevent this?

SG: With 3,000 peacekeepers in and around Port au Prince, they are patrolling and they are trying to maintain law and order around the city. So far, I think we have been able to maintain such order. We are extremely careful and we will pay attention to prevent any crimes, any violence.

Q: The US is sending 3,500 troops to Haiti. Will there be a joint command with the UN forces on the ground? You are not suggesting Mr. Mulet is going to be directing the United States army, are you?

SG: The Force Commander of the UN peacekeeping operations will coordinate, I hope, with the US military assistance team. I know that the South Command has been designated to provide assistance. I am sure that the military leaders will fully coordinate with each other.

Q: Under US command or UN command?

SG: As I told you, it is desirable that all these operations should be coordinated with the United Nations Mission there.

Q: In addition to the participation in the Flash Appeal that you mentioned, what other roles do you see President Clinton taking, and will he be available for a press briefing in the near future?

SG: I will ask him. I am sure that in principal he is available and willing to speak with you at a press briefing. I have asked him yesterday, in my meeting with him, that when this immediate and urgent operation is over, then we should look at the medium to long term construction of the society of Haiti, which has been totally destroyed. This has been a continuing effort. As you may know, last year we had a pledging conference in Washington, where President Clinton and I participated, and I have traveled with him. This is aimed at the medium to long-term reconstruction process, inviting as many investments as possible, and trying to encourage donors to do more on long-term reconstruction of the society, and providing some job opportunities and creating an investment-friendly atmosphere.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, did you have any chance to speak with President [René] Préval yet?

SG: Not yet. This seems to be a challenge. I will continue to try to talk with him. I saw him visiting UN headquarters [in Port au Prince] and I am very grateful for his support. At this time I think that he is very much concentrating his efforts to rescue and help their own people, in close coordination with the UN. I am sure that Mr. Mulet will have very close coordination and cooperation with President Préval, and I will try to continue to speak with him.

Q: You said that one of the main tasks was to help people to help. What do you do to avoid what happened with the tsunami, for instance, when too many people were gathering in the same small airport, or in the parks, for instance?

SG: Again, the situation is very challenging. Therefore, it is very important to help them also, so that they can help themselves. We have to organize, in a very systematic way. At this time, regrettably the Haitian Government and society seem to be overwhelmed by all this destruction, therefore it is very desirable and necessary at this time for the international community, led by the United Nations, to help them first so that we will be able to carry on the reconstruction in an orderly manner.

Thank you very much, and we will see you later.