

21 January 2010

PRESS BRIEFING

Haiti earthquake: How Irish aid agencies respond

The combination of devastating earthquake damage and weak infrastructure in a desperately poor country with huge development challenges has meant that the current relief operation in Haiti is one of the greatest challenges faced by Irish aid agencies.

“Now that aid is starting to get through to the people of Haiti, it’s vital to ensure the aid reaches those who need it most. Aid targeting and distribution is a highly specialised job, and we are calling on the Irish public to support Ireland’s professional aid agencies in their efforts to reach the poorest and most vulnerable people” said Hans Zomer, Director of Dóchas, the umbrella group of development NGOs in Ireland.

1. Addressing emergency needs

With the ‘search and rescue’ phase of the relief operation now nearing an end, humanitarian agencies’ attention is focused on meeting emergency needs, such as health care, food, water and shelter, amidst challenges of failing infrastructure and communications.

“Given the scale and urgency of the needs – 3 million people urgently needing assistance – the task facing aid agencies is daunting. Even as aid agencies are starting to reach out into the communities, access to basics such as shelter, sanitation, water, food and medicines remains limited, and the dangers of disease and insecurity are rising”, said Éamonn Casey, Policy Officer at Dóchas.

2. Coordinating the aid effort

The number of agencies arriving in Haiti now to help the victims and survivors means that coordination of efforts is vital. In the absence of sufficient capacity on the part of the Haitian Government, the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has a crucial role to play in ensuring effective relief to affected people. The job of coordinating aid is not only aimed at maximising efficiencies, but also to ensure that the aid meets people’s real needs, and reaches those who need it most.

Governments, the UN organisations, military forces and international aid agencies all work to alleviate the situation. Each must develop their own response, based on their role and experience, but also on internationally agreed rules and standards of quality, and based on close collaboration with others.

“The international community has agreed core principles of humanitarian aid: independence, neutrality and impartiality. Aid is given for a variety of reasons, and with many different intentions. It is absolutely crucial, therefore, that aid is not based on donor priorities, but on the needs of the people for whom it is intended” said Hans Zomer.

3. Ensuring aid reaches those most in need

In relief operations, speed is important. But effectiveness is even more important. However quickly the international community reacts, it is always local people who are the first to aid the victims of disaster. And local people have the knowledge and know-how that can make the difference between aid that works, and aid that is wasted.

“The scale of a relief operation such as the one now under way in Haiti is truly enormous. The last time the world saw an operation of this size was in 2004-05, in response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami. At the time, a lot of new organisations sprang up, and a lot of mistakes were made. It is vital that all aid initiatives put the victims’ needs at the heart of their response. Only by listening to the survivors can we decide where the priorities should be” stated Hans Zomer of Dóchas.

4. How people in Ireland can help

People in Ireland have a very strong track record in aiding the victims of disasters. The enormous scale of the destruction and suffering in Haiti has already prompted an outpouring of generosity across Ireland.

Irish NGOs, working together through the Dóchas network, are suggesting that the best way to support the aid effort is to contribute financially.

The Irish NGOs have launched a dedicated website, www.HowYouCanHelp.ie, with information about the background to emergency response, and with guidance on the most appropriate ways to help those affected by disasters.

A list of organisations working in Haiti is available on www.dochas.ie

Some agencies may need volunteer help here in Ireland; volunteers with skills such as accounting, fund-raising and logistics. Few agencies envisage sending untrained volunteers to Haiti, as volunteering needs to be part of a coordinated response plan, drawing on aid workers with emergency relief experience. The current security and logistics situation makes volunteering in Haiti itself largely unfeasible and undesirable.

5. The scale of the challenge

Latest Available Victim Figures:

Buried people	± 80,000
Extracted alive from the rubbles by int. rescue teams	121
Government estimate of overall death toll	± 200,000
People in need of urgent assistance	± 250,000
Homeless	± 2,000,000
Total people affected in some way	± 3,000,000

Main Immediate Priorities for Emergency Aid

- Emergency Health (surgical capacity, mobile medical teams)
- Water and sanitation
- There is a severe shortage of tents. 20,000 needed urgently
- Logistics (storage, transport, fuel), telecommunications
- Food supply

Main Challenges for International assistance

- UN to establish a humanitarian corridor to address logistics bottlenecks
- Management of large numbers of corpses/ major risk of epidemics
- Fuel is in increasingly short supply
- Deteriorating security situation (UN Security Risk Phase 3), need to strengthen police capacity

6. Funding

The enormous relief operation being mounted in Haiti requires funding. The United Nations have appealed for a total of \$575 million (€409million) to be made available, of which 19% has been pledged by donors to date.

The EU is channelling a total of €122 million in humanitarian assistance, and the Irish government has already pledged substantial funding for the work of UN agencies and Irish NGOs.

“The emergency phase will cost money, and after that the reconstruction of Haiti is going to be enormously expensive. Rather than simply rebuild, we must ensure that Haiti’s reconstruction is based on a model that will reduce risks for the future. It is vital that the reconstruction, too, is adequately funded, and this may require bold and innovative steps, including canceling the €890 million debt the country owes to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other financial institutions” said Hans Zomer.

< ENDS >

CONTACTS:

Hans Zomer, Dóchas Director, T. 085 728 3258
Eamonn Casey, Dóchas Policy Officer, T. 087 950 6222

NOTES:

- For more details of how professional emergency aid organisations work together, see www.HowYouCanHelp.ie
- See also the Dóchas briefing paper on NGO cooperation: www.dochas.ie/Shared/Files/2/Development_ngos_working_together_for_greater_impact.pdf