

TRANSCRIPT

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Event: Press conference on relief efforts in Haiti

Location: U.S. Embassy, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Speakers: Ambassador Lewis Lucke, U.S. Special Coordinator for Relief and Reconstruction and Lieutenant General Ken Keen, Commander, Joint Task Force Haiti

Ambassador Lucke: I'm Ambassador Lewis Lucke. I'm the U.S. Response Coordinator for Haiti. I'm proud and happy to be here with my colleague, Lieutenant General Ken Keen.

I think it's important to point out that we find ourselves about one month away from this terrible catastrophe that befell Haiti where the loss of life is an estimated 200,000 people with another 300,000 injured; well over a million people affected by the earthquake; and displaced people in and around Port-au-Prince, really some 700,000 people.

The United States has dedicated a very large effort to address the immediate needs of the Haitian people and we have brought to bear a number of U.S. agencies, and with our military colleagues and our international friends across the spectrum. We're doing the best we can to move as fast as we can to address the immediate needs of the Haitian people.

The first response really beginning the first day after the earthquake was rescue. We've brought in a number of teams from all over the United States. Many other countries did the same. We quickly became concentrated and focused on immediate relief efforts. That is to say a provision of food, water, medical attention and so forth.

I'm prepared to talk in more detail about exactly what this assistance contains later on in the question portion of this interview, but I would like to say I think just as I close these opening remarks, there are a few things that really strike us. The first one is the resilience of the Haitian people. But nobody should have to be this resilient.

The second thing is that this is truly an international effort. We have very profound and effective participation by many many friends of Haiti, countries around the world, most particularly international organizations like the United Nations and all of its organizations. We're working very closely with all of these organizations and with a number of NGO partners in carrying out this program of assistance.

The third thing is we have achieved and benefited from an incredible level of cooperation from the United States military forces. Their capacities, their capabilities, and the level of cooperation are really incredible. These men and women are truly heroes.

The last thing I want to point out is that there has been a great deal of very visible and effective Haitian leadership. The government of Haiti has been visible for us in many many areas. The planning that's taking place, the organization that's taking place, the taskings that are taking place in a number of areas, particularly shelter, sanitation, food, water, and so forth. We're very happy and encouraged by this. The participation and leadership of the government of Haiti is absolutely essential from here on into the future.

Let me close by saying this is a huge challenge. We do not underestimate how difficult and long term it's going to be. We're off to a good start, I think, with the cooperation of everyone that I've mentioned previously. We are, I hope, up to the challenge. We're determined to bring help and services to the government and the people of Haiti.

I'll close by turning over the microphone to my friend and my colleague General Ken Keen.

LtGen Keen: Thank you, Ambassador Lucke, and thank all of you for joining us this afternoon.

As mentioned, I have the honor of leading Joint Task Force Haiti. On 12 January I was here in Haiti in the capacity as the Deputy Commander for U.S. Southern Command. So I was sitting with the Ambassador at approximately 1652 hours, 4:52 p.m. in the afternoon when the earthquake struck. So I have seen first-hand the devastation that we are experiencing today and the suffering of the Haiti people.

As many of you know, the U.S. military was called on to support the U.S. Agency for International Development, the lead agency for our government in these relief efforts. So we responded immediately with several key tasks.

Immediately it was to save lives and provide emergency assistance to those that were struggling to meet the needs of the Haitian people. That began with the opening of the airfield for 24 hour operations, as well as bringing in aircraft to do medevac operations, to support our USAID partners in search and rescue operations. Since that time we have worked with the United Nations forces and other international partners such as Canada, France, Mexico, Spain and many others. Our priorities are simple. They are to provide much needed humanitarian assistance, whether that be food, water, shelter, or medical assistance, working side by side with our Brazilian-led United Nation forces and our other partners. And throughout Haiti, we are working side by side with non-government organizations every day.

So this is truly an international effort with a focus to have unity of effort in providing much needed relief assistance to the people of Haiti.

I think today we are where we are because of that cooperation and assistance. We've accomplished a lot, but we have a long way to go. With that I think I'll just close and provide an opportunity for any questions. Thank you.

Question: A question for the Ambassador, please. My name is John Volles. I'm with CNN.

You mentioned that you're working closely with the Haitian government, that they're integral in all of this. Given that, and also given this government's history with corruption, firstly, has there been any evidence of corruption in the distribution of aid to date? Also, given the fact that it's \$2.4 billion so far coming in from the international community, is there any mechanism in place or any mechanisms being discussed to try and avoid the issue of losing that money to corruption and to make sure that it gets to the people who need it the most?

Ambassador Lucke: It's a valid question. We're always concerned about issues of corruption anywhere we work around the world.

No, we don't have any evidence of any particular corruption here. There were stories of rice being sold in the market that had been distributed in these distribution points, but it turns out that much of the rice that was available locally before the earthquake was also from the same source that was purchased for distribution by the aid agencies, by the World Food Program, for example. So that wasn't true.

One of the, I think, misunderstandings about economic assistance in general is that we pass money in cash to local governments, and basically that's just not the way it works. We make grants and donations, for example, grants or contracts for the implementation of our activities to various organizations, be they the private sector, be they NGOs or passing funds to other international organizations. So we really do not work in the fashion of passing over cash to either the government of Haiti in this case, or really most other countries.

Question: If I can follow up. Given all that, is the Haitian government trustworthy? I guess that's the bottom line.

Ambassador Lucke: What I can tell you is that our experience has been that these are fine, intelligently motivated and organized people occupying the positions that we interface with them on a daily basis. And they have given us no reason to doubt their seriousness of purpose, level of organization, and what really is I think a very impressive ability to begin to coordinate this huge challenge that they and we are all presented with. So so far, so good.

Question: [Radio Metropole]. Ambassador Lucke, the question concerns the plan for Haiti reconstruction. Can you answer that issue with the government of Haiti?

Ambassador Lucke: The immediate challenge has been the short term, the rescue and the relief. At the same time we've been able to participate in a number of very good discussions and meetings and planning sessions not only with the government of Haiti but also with the donor community, especially those that are organized under the auspices of the United Nations. So inevitably we have been talking about how this program of reconstruction is going to be managed, what are the immediate needs in terms of assessing the damage and making plans accordingly that are going to come from that.

Let me just say very briefly that the government of Haiti, this is one of the areas that the government of Haiti has shown leadership on, and they were preparing for this Donors Conference. It's moving along. But we need to do immediate things first.

Question: [Radio Metropole]. [Inaudible] There are reports of plans for an unpopular decision that will be taken by the government of Haiti to relocate people. Will the U.S. Army be on the side of the PNH, the National Haitian Police? In terms of security.

LtGen Keen: As I said at the onset, Joint Task Force Haiti is here in support of USAID and working obviously alongside the international community. Our efforts are directed towards humanitarian assistance, providing relief. We haven't been asked to do anything beyond those particular roles.

We're also working, obviously, with the UN forces in carrying out their roles as it relates to humanitarian assistance, so we have not been asked to do anything beyond that.

Question: Frances Robles from the Miami Herald. I was wondering, once items get to Haiti are there still logjams in the system in getting it out there? If so, what items are they affecting and what are the cause of those disruptions?

LtGen Keen: I'll take the first part and then I'll ask Ambassador Lucke to pick up, because this is very much a two part challenge, if you will, in terms of a logistical moving of aid.

First is the movement of that aid to the seaport or to the airport, and our military along with others are assisting in that effort. It includes opening up the seaport. So the good news story here is that the capacity of the seaport to receive containers is adequate to receive everything that's coming this way.

The next piece of the challenge from that is to take it from assembly areas where those containers come into and move it out into distribution points. That's the piece where we pass off from the military to the civilian agencies, whether it's USAID or non-government organizations.

We have a piece of that second challenge in that we, when requested, provide security for convoys in the distribution effort alongside and with the UN forces.

So to get to your question, we have, at the current time we see that we have sufficient capacity to receive the aid and sufficient capability on the ground to distribute it, but there are challenges I think every day with ensuring we get the aid to all the locations it needs to go, and I'll ask Ambassador Lucke to talk a little bit about that.

Ambassador Lucke: I think General Keen's really covered it. It's important to understand that the logistics operation was a huge undertaking. A lot of commodities essential for the rescue and relief effort arrived within the first couple of days and then began to stream in in even greater quantities over the next few days, so a huge logistical and coordination effort was required.

Question: Are there certain items that still haven't been distributed because there are disruptions? What are those items, and what are those disruptions?

Ambassador Lucke: There were no disruptions. I wouldn't characterize it as that. Plenty of challenges. I'll give you a concrete example.

With all of the medical equipment coming into the country the warehouse that was normally used for the receipt and the onward distribution of medical supplies was really overwhelmed. Was that a disruption? No, because the supplies continued to roll out. It just needed to be organized in a more efficient manner in order to be able to compensate for the huge amount that was coming in.

So working with our military colleagues and the NGOs and the medical organizations that were the intended recipients of this medical stuff, equipment, commodities, surgical supplies and so forth, we had a big challenge but we're overcoming it. But the commodities continue to flow.

Question: [Telesur] Why for all millions that are coming in Haiti, three cents are going directly to the U.S. military. Why don't you use that money to help Haitian people to have better assistance during the period?

Ambassador Lucke: If I understand the question, I guess the answer is that most of the money that's coming in for humanitarian assistance has been going to address immediate problems of the Haitian people. By far, our mission is completely humanitarian in scope. That means the military support that we receive to make this program happen is also humanitarian in scope. There are costs associated with all of these efforts, that's for sure, and it's a considerable cost. Our country is a very generous nation and we're stepping up to the plate in order to be able to provide this assistance.

So I think the figures really speak for themselves. As of today we've provided \$537 million in humanitarian assistance to the people of Haiti and that's a considerable sum.

Question: Jonathan Katz with the Associated Press. You were talking about the immediate needs of needing food, water and shelter. Taking the third one, shelter when you go out in the streets, it's very obvious that this is not happening. The vast majority of the hundreds of thousands of people who lost their homes in the earthquake are living in makeshift tents, under bed sheets, under sticks. What's wrong with the process of giving people shelter? Why aren't there more tents coming in, and what are people going to do once it starts to rain as we get further on?

Ambassador Lucke: Shelter is a huge issue. Nothing really compares, I think, in terms of a monumental challenge for right now and for the coming weeks before the rainy season and the months before the hurricane season.

The short answer to the question is that it takes time because you have to mobilize resources and distribute them, and let me tell you, we in USAID say, and we say it often and we say it as clearly as we can you have to think outside the tent. Tents may be a temporary solution and it's going to be part of the mix, but the best practice approach that we've used around the world has been to help reestablish temporary structures based on supplying plastic sheeting, followed by building materials such as wooden framing and so forth. Tents are great, they're a lot better than nothing, but they basically impede the process of economic development and reconstruction and we want to move as fast as we can past the emergency stage into a reconstruction stage where we can actually help to fund the construction of these shelters that would put money in people's pockets and at the same time spread the shelter solution.

There is this organization that is what we call a cluster group under the auspices of the lead organization, the International Federation of the Red Cross on Shelter. It's our plan, and this is a process that has been led, as I said, by the government of Haiti, with the help of the international community and a number of partner NGOs. We, the United States, we're bringing in, we have tens of thousands of rolls of plastic sheeting. That's going out every day. We plan to have, as an international community, plastic sheeting available for everyone who needs it, at least a start of what their needs are in terms of plastic sheeting by May 1st. Then once we have everybody's initial needs, at least the start of being addressed, then we will bring in more and more after May. But the point is to protect people before the start of the rains.

Question: Ambassador Lucke, even though you are saying that you are making a lot of efforts to help Haitian people and Haitian citizens, a lot of observers can note in the streets that the process is very slow. How can you address these questions and this issue?

Ambassador Lucke: We do the best we can with all of the tools that are available to us, the commodities, the international organizations that we work with, the NGOs and so forth.

I actually think that we've done a good job of speeding up effective distribution of food. There was no food crisis. There has been no water crisis. There has been, as rapidly as we've received, almost as rapidly we've been able to move medical supplies and commodities out with some of the issues that I referred to earlier.

Basically this is a huge undertaking and it's going to take time.

That said, there are going to be pockets of need that we will identify and we will address.

Question: Richard Mohammed, The Final Call newspaper. Mr. Ambassador, can you say something about the NGOs that you're currently working with? Is it just the larger groups? Do you have any connection with, for example, Haitian-American charities or non-profits that may have been working in the country before the earthquake? And part of the reason for this question is because the National Medical Association, which is the African-American doctors and nurses group and the Haitian-American doctors group said initially when they asked to come to help in the country, they were essentially told to stand down, there was really no need for them.

Ambassador Lucke: We work with a very large number of NGOs. I don't have a precise count. It's got to be at least 50. Some are small and some are large. There are the normal ones that we worked with before the earthquake in Haiti that have great capacity and great experience, but we've also engaged a number of smaller NGOs with grants as small as maybe \$100,000 to \$200,000 all the way up to millions and millions in order to be able to respond effectively to a lot of needs. This is related to health, sanitation, job creation, shelter. And I would like to emphasize just how important job creation is in all of this.

We were inundated, I think, with volunteers. It's an expression of just how I think concerned and touched nations and people around the world were about the situation in Haiti. Everybody wanted to help.

At the same time, you can't organize effectively an influx, a huge influx of volunteers in a way that is effective and that immediately focuses on the first priorities of rescue, immediate relief, food, water, medical stuff and so forth.

We're very aware of the interest of the Haitian-American community and we've organized mechanisms to have volunteers and other very focused kinds of assistance including medical assistance be made available over the medium and the long term in Haiti. So if we haven't gotten to certain groups to be able to work with them now, as we identify needs we ought to be able to better match up the available volunteers and organizations like Haitian Americans, and there are plenty of them that have come back and are helping us heroically.

We will arrange that in a more I think systemic way in the future.

Question: What do those groups do to get on the radar?

Ambassador Lucke: They're on the radar. Give me your contacts and I will get you connected with the web site and all the other information you need.

Question: [Al-Jazeera English] Mr. Ambassador, a question about your feelings with the Haitian government. You mentioned that they've shown leadership and that they are very capable and effective, yet President Preval has only appeared before his own people a handful of times. The streets of the city at night are extremely dangerous and people say they are not secure in any way with the Haitian authorities involved in that security. And furthermore, frankly, whenever we talk to Haitians, ordinary people on the streets, they say whatever you do, don't give the aid to our government. Do it yourselves or do it through some third party, but we don't believe in our government any more. So what do you say to the Haitian people who have that belief, sir?

Ambassador Lucke: I don't know where to start except to say I refer to my previous answer which is that we don't provide funds directly to the Haitian government. We work through a number of international organizations, NGOs and so forth. So that by definition really doesn't have any credibility.

If you know anything about Haitian history and Haitian politics, it's a question of a lot of turmoil and a lot of stories and a lot of rumors and all these things. As what happened in many similar situations in developing countries, or in our country.

So I have to say that you're not going to make everybody happy. The best we can do is to account for our funds, make sure they go through the right hands that have accountability systems in place, because we take our charge as the controllers or the directors or overseers of American taxpayer money very very seriously, and we are not going to jeopardize that responsibility or that charge in any shape, manner or form.

Moderator: Thank you once again for coming today and for your patience with the late start.

As you know, we usually have Monday, Wednesday, Friday press conferences, but this Friday in honor of the National Day of Mourning we will not be having a press conference here at the Embassy.

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