



Haitians walk past damaged structures on Tuesday in capital Port-au-Prince after a huge earthquake measuring 7.0 rocked the impoverished Caribbean country, toppling buildings and causing widespread damage and panic.

Relief agencies mobilise 'massive' aid for Haiti

AFP, Geneva

The international Red Cross and United Nations on Wednesday unlocked emergency funds and mobilised supplies for a "massive" aid operation in Haiti amid fears of huge devastation following the earthquake there.

"The priority is to find survivors," said Elisabeth Byrs, a spokeswoman for the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

"We are working against the clock," she told journalists, as some 37 search and rescue teams from a global network were mobilised by the United Nations.

UN maps placed the epicentre barely 15 kilometres (10 miles) from the capital Port-au-Prince and indicated that some 238,000 people lived in areas exposed to the most intense tremor with "violent" or "extreme" shaking.

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said the area most affected by the 7.0 magnitude quake was Port-au-Prince, and the West Province with a population of 2.2 million.

Aid officials reported that the worst damage was to poorly built homes and shantytowns but insisted it was too early to give estimates of casualties.

"Amid the crying and wailing, people are spending the night outside," the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) chief in Haiti, Ricardo Conti, said in a statement.

"People are trying to comfort each other. What you are hearing in the streets are the prayers of thanks of those who survived," he added.

"It is extremely difficult to move around the city to assess needs. What is certain is that the quake has had a massive impact on a population already reeling from other recent disasters," Conti said.

Federation spokesman Jean-Luc Martinage said "a massive international aid operation was needed."

"Emergency stocks are repositioned in Haiti and will allow us to bring aid to 3,000 families for three to four days," Martinage told AFP.

"But we'll have to swiftly bring relief supplies from our regional disaster response centre based in Panama."

The Red Cross said "the most urgent needs at this time are search and rescue, field hospitals, emergency health, water purification, emergency shelter, logistics and telecommunications."

Red Cross and UN aid was being prepared at regional bases in Panama, ready to be flown in through the airport at Port-au-Prince or the neighbouring Dominican Republic.

The UN's World Food Programme said it could respond swiftly with some 15,000 tonnes of food supplies in Haiti, while emergency Red Cross supplies in Haiti included kitchen kits, personal hygiene kits, blankets and containers for storing drinking water.

"We have already launched an emergency operation," said WFP official Charles Vincent.

Six ICRC relief experts were due to fly into Haiti on Wednesday to support the Haitian Red Cross and help coordinate international relief.

A Red Cross team would also be leading a crucial assessment of the damage in Haiti along with European Union experts that will allow relief agencies to gauge aid needs.

The ICRC said medical needs and clean water supplies would be "considerable in the short term."

"Everything that's infrastructure isn't working," said ICRC spokesman Simon Schorno.

Scenes of horror in Haiti

AFP, Port-au-Prince

In just one terrifying minute the earth convulsed Tuesday in Haiti, flattening buildings and casually tossing chunks of twisted metal and concrete into the air.

Thousands fled sobbing in terror and panic onto the streets of the capital Port-au-Prince, seeking to escape the fury of the 7.0 earthquake.

But hundreds are feared to have been killed in yet another tragedy to strike the impoverished Caribbean nation, which is still trying to recover from a series of 2008 hurricanes and storms.

"The centre of Port-au-Prince has been destroyed, it's a catastrophe," wailed Pierre, covered in dust, and so shocked he could hardly speak as he surveyed the devastation around him, having walked several kilometres to find his house.

No corner of the city had been spared from the wave of destruction, which unleashed its fury on the two million inhabitants for a full 60 seconds, witnesses said.

Many have been forced to abandon the ruins of their homes, and were squatting in sports grounds and open spaces. Few dared to return indoors, terrified of being buried in one of the huge aftershocks, which continued to rock the nation.

"When we get an idea of the toll it will be measured in the hundreds," a local doctor, who was bloodied and nursing an injured left arm, told AFP.

Rescue efforts were hampered when communications were snapped in the minutes after the earthquake struck at 21:53 GMT.

Haitians said the imposing white presidential palace -- in centre of the city -- as well as hospitals, hotels and schools had simply all collapsed.

Of those buildings left standing, many were scarred by long fissures where the plaster and bricks had cracked in the force of the quake.

The headquarters of the United Nations mission in the country had been levelled, a local employee of the UN force told AFP.

"The headquarters of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti has been destroyed in large part. There are numerous people underneath the rubble, both dead and injured," a local employee of the force said.

The quake was felt as far away as Cuba and the Dominican Republic, but most initial damage was found in and around the Haitian capital.

Killer quake struck just below the surface

AFP, Paris

The quake that struck Haiti on Tuesday erupted just below the surface on a notorious fault where two plates of the Earth's crust jostle and grind, scientists said on Wednesday.

"It was a very shallow earthquake, occurring at a depth of around 10 km," seismologist Yann Klinger of the Institute of the Physics of the Globe (IPG) in Paris told AFP.

"Because the shock was so big and occurred at such a shallow depth, just below the city (of Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital), the damage is bound to be very extensive," he said.

The US Geological Survey (USGS) said on its website that the quake, which measured a very powerful 7.0 magnitude, occurred at 21:53 GMT on Tuesday 15km (9.4 miles) southwest of Port-au-Prince at a depth of around 8.3kms (5.2 miles).

The movement was horizontal, occurring on the northern rim of the Caribbean plate where it rubs with the North American plate, the USGS and Klinger said.

"This fault is well known, it had been mapped and researchers have been following it," said Klinger.

He added that the death toll in Haiti, the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, would most probably be amplified by shoddy buildings and poorly-equipped emergency services.

"The buildings are likely to be very flimsy and not necessary of a very high quality. In addition, first responders may not be as effective as they are in Western Europe, for instance," he said.



A Haitian woman is helped to get out of rubble of a damaged building yesterday in Port-au-Prince after the huge earthquake.



A woman walks along a snow-covered road close to the village Green in Hartley Wintney, in Hampshire, 67km west of London yesterday. Fresh snowfalls hit parts of Britain on Wednesday, forcing airports to close as businesses counted the cost of the worst winter in decades.

Blair spin doctor denies 'sexing up' Iraq dossier

AFP, London

Tony Blair's former chief spin doctor Alastair Campbell has fiercely denied "sexing up" a dossier which claimed Iraq could launch chemical or biological weapons within 45 minutes ahead of the 2003 war.

In a defiant appearance Tuesday at a public inquiry into the conflict, Campbell said that while the controversial document could have been "clearer", he still defended "every single word" of it -- and the invasion itself.

"I think Britain as a country should feel incredibly proud of the role it played in taking on one of the most brutal, barbarous regimes in history," said Campbell, one of the former prime minister's closest allies.

The first big name to appear before the Chilcot inquiry, he appeared days before Blair gives evidence later this month or early next.

Current prime minister Gordon Brown -- who Campbell said was one of the "key ministers" Blair consulted in the run-up to war -- will appear after this year's general election, expected in May.

Aside from his staunch defence of the infamous dossier, Campbell told the inquiry that while Britain pressed the United States to seek a diplomatic solution, Blair wrote notes in 2002 to then president George W Bush saying he would support military action if this did not work.

"If that cannot be done diplomatically and it is to be done militarily, Britain will be there. That would be the tenor of the communication to the president," he said.

A large part of Campbell's evidence focused on a September 2002 dossier, which the British government issued to explain its growing concerns over Iraq, six months before Britain joined the invasion.

Iran Speaker accuses Obama of unleashing state terrorism

AFP, Tehran

Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, Iran's former chief nuclear negotiator, accused US President Barack Obama of state terrorism yesterday over the killing in Tehran of a leading atomic scientist.

In an angry address to Iran's conservative-dominated parliament, Larijani reiterated Iranian charges that the US Central Intelligence Agency and Israel's Mossad were behind the scientist's death in a bombing on Tuesday.

"Such filthy actions are easy to carry out but such adventurism will do you no good," the ISNA news agency quoted Larijani as saying in reference to Obama.

"You have practically promoted acts of terrorism," he said.

"This black spot will be recorded in the dossier of US crimes against the Iranian nation."

Massoud Ali Mohammadi, a particle physics professor at prestigious Tehran University, was killed by a bomb strapped to a motorcycle in the capital's well-to-do northern suburbs on Tuesday.

Neither the police nor the intelligence services have yet reported any leads in their investigation and Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki stopped short of explicitly accusing Washington of being behind the bombing.

"The action taken yesterday by the enemies of logic, justice, humanity and the Iranian people is being investigated by relevant authorities," Mottaki told reporters when asked about the accusations of US and Israeli involvement.

But Larijani was explicit in blaming the CIA and Mossad.

"We had received clear information a few days before (the assassination) that the (intelligence) service of the Zionist regime, with the cooperation of the CIA, were seeking to carry out a terrorist act in Tehran," he said.

Similar allegations by other Iranian officials of US involvement in the attack have been dismissed out of hand by Washington.

"Charges of US involvement are absurd," State Department spokesman Mark Toner told reporters on Tuesday.

Islamist students and the volunteer Basiji militia condemned the killing of Ali Mohammadi, whom they described as "a Basiji professor."

But his name appeared on a list of academics backing opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi in a disputed June 12 presidential election, which gave hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a second term.

Fresh snowfalls heap more misery on shivering Europe

AFP, London

Fresh snowfalls heaped further misery on parts of Europe on Wednesday, closing airports and schools and disrupting road and rail links notably in Britain and France.

As overnight snow and plummeting temperatures brought a recent thaw to a halt, British business leaders said the worst winter in decades is costing the country hundreds of millions of pounds a day.

In the latest disruption to air transport, London's Gatwick airport was closed for snow clearance until 1600 GMT -- notably delaying an emergency rescue team heading for Haiti after a devastating earthquake there.

London Heathrow reported the cancellation of 84 mostly short-haul inbound and outbound flights.

"Our airfield team is working round the clock to keep both runways clear but the threat of further snow and ice at the airport remains," the world's busiest international passenger air hub said.

London City, Birmingham, Cardiff and Southampton airports reopened following closure.

There was similar disruption for air travellers in France.

In Paris, 40 percent of all flights from the main Charles de Gaulle airport were cancelled due to snow and sleet showers, while half of flights were scrapped at Orly.

Regional airports across France were also forced to close or reduce traffic because of snow.

French road authorities issued a ban against heavy commercial road traffic from midnight until noon on Wednesday in eight departments around Paris as the winter storm dumped three to five centimetres of snow across northern France.

More than 4,000 trucks were forced to park west of the capital region.

Eurostar rail services between Britain and continental Europe were "running a near-normal service".

Two trains from London to Brussels, one from London to Paris and the same numbers in the opposite directions were not running, though customers with tickets had seats reserved for them on the next train.

In Britain, the Federation of Small Businesses estimated that the bad weather was costing the economy at least 600 million pounds (975 million dollars, 670 million euros) a day.

"Small businesses have been particularly hard-hit during the recent bad weather, with staff unable to make it to work because of school closures and snowbound roads," said FSB chairman John Wright.

In Germany, one of the countries worst hit by the big freeze, temperatures were reaching minus six degrees Celsius, with fresh snow in the south, while some secondary roads in the north were still blocked.

Switzerland's main publicly owned salt works said that it had turned down new orders from the snowbound Netherlands and Germany in order to cater for booming domestic needs.

Israel develops robot army to meet battlefield needs

ANI, Melbourne

To meet their battlefield needs without putting soldiers at risk, Israel is developing an army of robotic fighting machines that offers a window onto the potential future of warfare.

Sixty years of near-constant war, a low tolerance for enduring casualties in conflict, and its hi-tech industry has long made Israel one of the world's leading innovators of military robotics, The Wall Street Journal revealed.

"We're trying to get to unmanned vehicles everywhere on the battlefield for each platoon in the field. We can do more and more missions without putting a soldier at risk," the paper quoted Lt. Colonel Oren Berebbi, head of the Israel Defence Forces technology branch, as saying.

In 10 to 15 years, one-third of Israel's military machines will be unmanned, predicts Giora Katz, vice president of Rafael Advanced Defence Systems Ltd, the Australian reports.

Qaeda kingpin killed in Yemen

AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni security forces have killed an al-Qaeda kingpin in Shabwa province in intensive operations against the group believed behind the botched bombing of a US airliner, an official said on Wednesday.

"Abdullah Mehdar was killed last night by security forces which had besieged the house he hid in," provincial Governor Ali Hassan al-Ahmadi told reporters.

Mehdar was the leader of an al-Qaeda cell in al-Houta region, in the province of Shabwa, 600 kilometres (375 miles) east of Sanaa.

Security forces were hunting for the remaining members of the cell, Ahmadi said.

The al-Qaeda branch in Yemen claimed responsibility for the failed Christmas Day attack on a US airliner, with the United States accusing the group of training the alleged perpetrator, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab.

Ahmadi had told AFP Tuesday that security forces arrested four al-Qaeda suspects, two of them wounded in a firefight.

A tribal source said that 18 suspects in the same area managed to escape a police raid and fled to a neighbouring mountain.

The Yemeni government had sent military reinforcements over the past few weeks to some eastern provinces as it intensified its fight against al-Qaeda militants.

Separately, two policemen were killed and four wounded in an ambush by unknown gunmen in the area of al-Nuqbah, in Shabwa, Ahmadi said.

The governor had on Sunday announced that dozens of al-Qaeda fighters, including Saudis and Egyptians who have fled Afghanistan, are hiding in Shabwa.

Among them, he added, are the leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) Nasser al-Wahishi, his number two, Sa'eed Ali al-Shehri, a Saudi, and radical US-Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaqi.



Indian villagers participate in community fishing at Bamuni Lake, near Sonapur village, some 40km from Guwahati, the capital city of the northeastern Assam yesterday. As per tradition people gathered to participate in community fishing to mark the winter harvest festival.