

Haiti Earthquake Relief Efforts Center Around An Aging Airport

Date: January 15, 2010 8:57 AM

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Tags: [aircraft](#), [aviation](#), [FAA](#), [Federal Aviation Administration](#)

Permalink: <http://bit.ly/5jjJjP>

The first wave of international aid began Thursday for earthquake-ravaged Haiti. Planes from around the world flew to the tiny country loaded with food, water, medicine, clothes and other emergency supplies.

But there is a big problem. Haiti's main airport - the Toussaint L'Ouverture International Airport just outside of Port au Prince - was seriously damaged by the earthquake. It is a small single runway airport with a weak infrastructure that was built back in 1965.

While the runway, taxiways and airport apron are operational, radio communication was out due to control tower damage. The airport lighting system was shut down because of power outages and there was a limited amount of jet fuel. Many planes ended up circling in the air with nowhere to go.

In addition to the airport problems, the port facilities in Haiti are inoperable. If airport delays become permanent, bringing supplies through the port will be almost impossible. Roads to the port are buckled from the earthquake and cranes are toppled. How do you get these supplies to the thousands of people who so desperately need it?

A number of charter aircraft companies are taking people and cargo to the Dominican Republic and over rugged mountains into Haiti but this takes time and time is critical.

U.S Air Force and F.A.A. Oversee Operations

US Air Force Special Tactics officers were the first to arrive. They cleared the runway, set up generators and restored air traffic control so planes carrying the most precious cargo of all - search and rescue teams - could land and take off.

Commercial air service was grounded because there wasn't enough room or enough fuel. The Federal Aviation Administration, operating out of Miami, handled air space operations. The U.S. military will probably take charge of the overall logistics and, according to authorities, the airport should be able to handle the influx of air traffic. But time is running out for the people buried in the rubble.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the situation overwhelming. She said doctors and rescue personnel are dealing with extraordinary challenges in their attempts to help. She called the next few days "crucial" to ensure the safety of those who are injured or remain alive.

President Obama said: "This is one of those moments that calls for American leadership."

A massive humanitarian effort has begun for a country devastated and desperate for help. Doctors, nurses, rescue teams and professionals are now on the ground. Commercial pilots and air traffic controllers – another important part of this mission – are helping them get there.

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