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CRS expects 'thousands and thousands' Haiti dead, injured

Dennis Sadowski | Jan. 14, 2010

Dead covered in Haitian streets (CNS photo)

WASHINGTON
Catholic Relief Services was preparing for "thousands and thousands" of dead and injured people in the wake of the most devastating earthquake to strike Haiti in two centuries, said Karel Zelenka, the agency's country representative.

Among those reported dead were Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot of Port-au-Prince and Zilda Arns Neumann, a pediatrician who founded the Brazilian bishops' children's commission and sister of Brazilian Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, retired archbishop of Sao Paulo.

A group of Montfort priests and seminarians initially reported to have died in Port-au-Prince were not even in the city and were not killed, a spokesman said.

In an e-mail from the capital, Port-au-Prince, Zelenka told his colleagues at CRS headquarters in Baltimore that damage was "incredible all around."

In response, CRS initially has committed $5 million to help survivors, said John Rivera, the agency's communications director.

CRS already had food, bedding, water storage containers and other supplies in warehouses around the country and agency staff is working to assess if it was damaged in the quake. Other supplies will be shipped from the Dominican Republic and Miami, he said.

Robyn Fieser, CRS regional information officer, shared part of Zelenka's message with Catholic News Service Jan. 13 and said he wrote that the Haitian government has not made any announcement about rescue and recovery efforts.

"On the radio stations there has been only wild music," Fieser said Zelenka wrote. "People have been screaming and chanting all over the place. People are chanting and praying. It's the disaster of the century."

Zelenka reported that the only rescue efforts he and his staff have seen are by people digging through rubble

with their hands.

Cell phone service was sporadic, with calls lasting only a minute or so, making it difficult for CRS staff to communicate with each other, Zelenka said.

CRS international staff were safe and accounted for; however, some local CRS employees had not been heard from since the earthquake hit shortly before 5 p.m. local time Jan. 12, Fieser said. CRS offices survived the magnitude 7 temblor, but an office building across the street collapsed, she said.

The quake was felt as far away as eastern Cuba, where houses shook but there were no reports of significant damage.

"We felt it very strongly and I would say for a long time. We had time to evacuate," Archbishop Dionisio Garcia Ibanez of Santiago, Cuba, president of the Cuban bishops' conference, told the Associated Press.

Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of Orlando, Fla., home to 80,000 Haitians, told CNS he had been in touch via e-mail with Archbishop Bernardito Auza, the Vatican's apostolic nuncio in the country.

"He tells me the devastation is incredible," Bishop Wenski said. "He said he toured the city last night and it was quite devastating. Priests and nuns were in shock."

Amid the confusion, Archbishop Auza told the Vatican missionary news agency Fides that 100 priests and seminarians also were killed. The clergy were reportedly members of the Montfort order on retreat in Port-au-Prince.

Father Matt Considine of the U.S. province of the Montfort Fathers, based in New York, said that although the "situation is very confused," the order's officials have not been told that any of their members died in Port-au-Prince. The order has fewer than 100 members in the country, he told CNS Jan. 13, adding that although there was a retreat going on, it was not in Port-au-Prince and everyone is "presumed OK."

There have been reports of "lots of pain and misery" but no deaths reported associated with the Montfort Fathers, he said.

The U.S. government and relief agencies were mobilizing quickly to provide assistance to the devastated area around the Haitian capital. The quake's epicenter was about 10 miles southwest of the capital. It was the country's worst quake in two centuries.

At the White House, President Barack Obama offered his thoughts and prayers to the Haitians.

"We are closely monitoring the situation and we stand ready to assist the people of Haiti," he said.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon confirmed Jan. 13 that at least five U.N. staffers were killed and that more than 100 were missing, including the Tunisian head of the world body's mission in Port-au-Prince.

CAFOD, the overseas development and relief agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, immediately pledged $162,000 for water, food, medicine and shelter for victims in the worst affected areas.

A special Mass to pray for victims was scheduled for Jan. 13 at the Cathedral of St. Mary in Miami.

Bishop Wenski asked parishes to sponsor special collections for quake victims.

Information about injuries, fatalities and damage was difficult to obtain because major communication links

were destroyed in the disaster.

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