

Major earthquake devastates Haitian capital

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An earthquake hit the Haitian capital city of Port-au-Prince at 4:53 PM on Tuesday. It is feared that the quake will claim a large number of victims, especially because of poorly constructed buildings in Haiti, the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation.

The 7.0-magnitude quake was centered 10 miles southwest of Port-au-Prince, a city of over 2 million people. The quake was the most powerful to strike Haiti since at least 1770, according to the US Geological Survey (USGS). It was centered only 5 miles underground. Two strong aftershocks, at 5.9 and 5.5 on the Richter scale, followed shortly afterwards.

John Bellini, a USGS geophysicist, told the *Wall Street Journal*: "With a strong and shallow earthquake like this in such a populated area, it could really cause substantial damage." He added that 1.8 million people live in the area where the earthquake had the greatest intensity.

Tsunami alerts were issued for Cuba, the Bahamas and much of the Caribbean. The quake was felt in Santo Domingo, the capital of the neighboring Dominican Republic, and as far as eastern Cuba.

A cloud of dust blanketed the city after the quake. A hospital collapsed in the wealthier Pétienville neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, along with a government ministry building, and many private houses fell into ravines. The *Guardian* reported that rescue efforts were proceeding with "bare hands and improvised tools."

Cell phone signals, landline telephone communication and electricity were all knocked out in Port-au-Prince. Felix Augustin, Haiti's consul general in New York, said, "Communication is absolutely impossible. I cannot get through."

Several charities in Port-au-Prince managed to briefly communicate with international media, reporting widespread devastation. Raphaëlle Chenet, administrator of Mercy and Sharing, said, "I saw dead

bodies, people are screaming, they are on the street panicking, people are hurt. There are a lot of wounded, broken heads, broken arms... There is no electricity, electric poles are down all over the place." Chenet also heard explosions that she attributed to ruptured natural gas lines.

Karel Zelenka, representative in Haiti for Catholic Relief Services, described "total disaster and chaos" before his telephone line was cut. He anticipated there would be thousands of dead.

Philip J. Crowley, a senior US State Department spokesman, said US embassy personnel reported "widespread damage," including heavy damage to Haiti's presidential palace. He said US officials were planning assistance to Haiti.

The US Southern Command, which oversees US military operations in the Caribbean and Latin America, said its personnel were assessing what aid might be required.

Given evidence that there has been severe damage to buildings in wealthy neighborhoods, it appears all the more likely that the earthquake will have devastated fragile shanties in poorer neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince. The CIA World Factbook states that 80 percent of Haitians live in poverty, and 54 percent live in "abject poverty."

On its web site, the Organization of American States (OAS) stated: "Among the numerous factors explaining the extent of the loss of lives and goods are the absence of land use zoning and building guidelines, and comprehensive enforcement mechanisms." The OAS added that Haiti has no national building codes.

Former US ambassador to Haiti Timothy Carney told CNN that Port-au-Prince was "particularly at risk because it grew rapidly from a population of about 250,000 in the mid-1950s to more than 2 million today, all with little oversight."

Carney said that many people arriving in Port-au-

Prince lived in shanties, not concrete structures. He added: “My fear is that they all fell down.”



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