

US halts military flights to evacuate Haiti earthquake victims

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Beginning last Wednesday, the US military refused to fly wounded Haitians to the US for medical treatment. Amid a growing media outcry against the decision, the White House reversed the decision and announced at 5 p.m. yesterday that it would resume the flights in the next 12 hours.

Previously, the US military had flown severely injured Haitians—victims with spinal cord injuries, large-scale burns, and other massive trauma—to US hospitals in C-130 transport planes. Many of these flights landed in Florida, whose hospitals are taking hundreds of Haitian earthquake victims. However, the US military suddenly suspended these evacuee flights on January 27.

Dr. Barth Green, the chairman of neurological surgery at the University of Miami, who is participating in relief efforts in Haiti, told the *Miami Herald* his field hospital had 100 patients who would die if flights did not resume. These included several children who will die from tetanus, unless they go on ventilators and other medical treatments unavailable in Haiti. Later, three children from Dr. Green's group of critical patients were flown on a privately arranged flight to a hospital in Philadelphia.

US government spokespeople offered varying justifications for halting the flights. On Friday, military officials blamed Florida hospitals for refusing to take more patients and said that Florida had requested payment from the US government to take further Haitian wounded.

However, a White House spokesman said: "There was no policy decision by anyone to suspend evacuee flights. This situation arose as we started to run out of room."

On Saturday, Major James Lowe, deputy chief of public affairs for the US Transportation Command,

said: "The places they were being taken, without being specific, were not willing to continue to receive those patients without a different arrangement being worked out by the government to pay for the care." Lowe claimed that since more medical care had become available in Haiti, the need for evacuating the wounded had "declined significantly."

Doctors contested the reasons US officials gave for halting the flights.

Green told the *New York Times* he had "dozens of paraplegics, burn victims, and other patients that need to be evacuated." Noting that his patients were "the sickest of the sickest," he said that he and US military doctors agreed: "We can't care for them either on the ground in Haiti or on the USNS *Comfort* [a US hospital ship off Haiti]. We all agree they need to be medevaced out, but all medevacs by the armed forces have been stopped."

Green noted the large number of medical facilities available in the US to treat earthquake victims: "We have offers from almost every major university hospital in the United States to take patients.... We have hospitals waiting to receive [patients]. But at the highest level of the US government, they can't seem to get them out."

Green told ABC News: "The problem is that on a high level, a decision has been made to hold military evacuations which are life-saving."

Dr. Matthew Ruel of the University of Miami, who is working at the same field hospital as Green, told ABC News: "For the first week or so after the disaster, you had this mass mobilization of everyone wanting to help. And then at some point...somebody has to pay for it. And that's when, all of a sudden the door slams shut."

The contrast between the response of the US government and the outpouring of concern and support

in the US population could not be starker. A January 25 KRC Research poll found that 45 percent of US families had donated money to the Haiti relief effort; 10 percent had donated goods or supplies. The most popular venue for contributions was the American Red Cross, which handled 47 percent of those giving money.

Florida officials confirmed that the US military cut off the flights amid a dispute between Florida and the US federal government.

On Wednesday, Florida Governor Charlie Crist asked the federal government for funding to reimburse Florida hospitals for care given to Haitian victims. He also asked Washington to send remaining quake victims into northern Florida, so Miami would be ready for the upcoming Super Bowl, the national American football championship.

Florida officials rapidly backed down from their position. Stirling Ivey, a spokesman for Crist, said: “Florida stands ready to assist our neighbors in Haiti, but we need a plan of action and reimbursement for the care we are providing.”

As of this writing, however, Washington had not indicated how or whether it would assist Florida financially. John Cherry, external affairs director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management, said the US military halted the flights “shortly after” Crist’s request. Cherry added that, in terms of financial help, “Eighteen days into this we have no guarantee of anything.”

Florida Department of Children & Families Secretary George Sheldon said that in meetings with hospital administrators, he had outlined five “funding mechanisms, including Medicaid,” so hospitals could continue treating earthquake survivors.

The US and Florida governments also disagreed yesterday on how many Haitians were being treated in Florida. The White House released figures claiming that 435 earthquake victims had been airlifted to the US, 18,500 treated by US personnel on the ground, and 19,000 treated on the *Comfort* (with 635 currently on board). Florida officials claimed that Florida alone had treated 526 victims: 413 in South Florida, 76 in the Orlando area, and 37 in the Tampa area.

The death toll in the earthquake now stands at over 200,000 people. The Haitian government has issued estimates that at least 250,000 people were wounded.

Beyond the US military’s decision to halt medical evacuations, there is evidence of a broad stand-down of US government agencies to deny assistance to Haitian earthquake victims.

Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius has not acted on Crist’s request to activate the National Disaster Medical System. Besides logistical assistance, the system allows the federal government to give local authorities financial help. The *Miami Herald* noted that more than 1,000 hospitals in the US participate in the National Disaster Medical System, but it has not been activated in response to the Haitian disaster: “It is unclear, however, whether the earthquake in Haiti qualifies for the system.”

US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has the option of extending “humanitarian parole” to non-US citizens to come and receive treatment that would be covered by Medicaid. Matthew Chandler, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security, confirmed to the *New York Times* that USCIS had only extended humanitarian parole to 34 people.



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