



Haiti Earthquake—UNEP/OCHA Disaster Management Teams on Standby

Staff Member Caught up in Tragedy Sends Eye Witness Account from Port au Prince

13 January 2010 - A UNEP staff member based in Haiti has sent a tragic eye-witness account through to colleagues in the wake of the country's worst and most devastating earthquake since 1770.

Andrew Morton, a programme manager working on a project aimed at restoring the forests, freshwaters and other ecosystems of the Caribbean island, said: "I am writing this from the main UN compound in Port au Prince. The quake was a direct hit on the city. Destroyed buildings are everywhere, walls collapsed, roads blocked etc".

"Casualties will be the many thousands. UN has also suffered casualties as a 6 storey UN building collapsed. The priority for Tuesday is search and rescue and preparing to assist the population," he added.

Mr. Morton, a veteran of UNEP's Post Conflict and Disaster Management Branch, said he planned to stay to assist in emergency engineering and building and infrastructure assessment.

In Geneva, the Joint UNEP/Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Unit was monitoring the situation closely and teams are on standby to assist with the forthcoming recovery efforts.

The unit has operated in the aftermath of other earthquake disasters including in Pakistan, and Peru as well as the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, said today: "We are deeply concerned for the people of Haiti and our sympathies go out to those families and communities devastated by the earthquake as well as to the families of UN staff members who have died or been injured".

"The immediate need is for activities such as search and rescue and for medical support and basic provisions. However, UNEP stands ready as part on an overall UN effort to assist in areas where the earthquake may have triggered environmental hazards as a result of for example infrastructure damaged and the release of pollution or similar hazards," he added.

The earthquake, which comes only months after the hurricanes which hit Haiti in 2008, poses a significant setback to the strides the country had made recently to reverse years of environmental degradation.

Haiti recently signed a tri-national agreement with Cuba and the Dominican Republic to develop a Caribbean Biological Corridor with the assistance of UNEP and the World Food Programme (WFP). In addition, UNEP, along with other UN agencies planned to

launch the Haiti Regeneration Initiative in 2010 comprising of reforestation, marine environment and renewable energy projects.

However, the status of Haiti Regeneration Initiative is uncertain, with the main priority being humanitarian relief. Speaking from UN Headquarters in New York on Wednesday, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon said;

“My heart goes out to the people of Haiti after this devastating earthquake. At this time of tragedy, I am very concerned for the people of Haiti and also for the many United Nations staff who serve there. I am receiving initial reports and following developments closely”.

The Joint UNEP/OCHA Environmental Emergencies Unit has distributed a Hazard Identification Tool (HIT), to allow Disaster Assessment and Coordination teams on the ground to recognize potential secondary risks to human safety as well as the environment. The HIT lists the facilities and objects most likely to pose a risk in the aftermath of the earthquake, and their probable impacts.

For more information, please contact:

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