

Haiti plans for assistance to 500,000 people as Hurricane Tomas approaches

(Port au Prince, 31 October 2010): The Government of Haiti, humanitarian agencies and the UN stabilization mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) have initiated a response to Hurricane Tomas based on a working projection that the storm could affect up to half a million people.

Over the last 24 hours, the government and the humanitarian leadership have worked together to initiate contingency plans, mobilize stocks, and identify gaps and needs as Hurricane Tomas approaches, in addition to managing the ongoing responses to the cholera epidemic and the earthquake.

“This storm could not have come at a more difficult time,” said Humanitarian Coordinator Nigel Fisher. “Although we have made extensive preparations and prepositioned stocks across the country, some crucial supplies have been badly depleted by ongoing needs, particularly the response to the ongoing cholera epidemic. Working with the government, we have started responding with what we have – scaling up distributions in camps, for example, and sending trucks down to the southern coast – but we must now race to mobilize everything else we need.”

In addition to existing stocks, priority needs identified include 150,000 tarpaulins, 90,000 cases of soap, 90,000 hygiene kits, 200,000 sachets of oral rehydration salts (for cholera treatment) and 200 field tents (to provide emergency Cholera Treatment Centres), as well as support with logistics, and windup radios and megaphones to support ongoing public information about cholera and hurricane warnings.

“We need emergency shelter. We need water and sanitation supplies. And we need as much of it as possible in place before Hurricane Tomas hits,” said Mr. Fisher. “With our Haitian counterparts, we are appealing to donors, to organizations in the region and to humanitarian partners to help us get what we need in time.”

Most of the shortages relate to stocks depleted as a result of cholera epidemic and to shelter. Although tarpaulins and tents are routinely imported into Haiti, they are usually immediately distributed to families in need in the camps to help protect them against daily rains, making stockpiling extremely difficult. Stocks were also depleted by a major storm on 24 September. Food supplies are sufficient, as are stocks of aquatabs (water purification tablets) which have been committed by the IFRC.

Preparations for the arrival of Hurricane Tomas began on 30 October, with regional stocks of tarpaulins being mobilised from Panama. All terrain trucks containing enough fuel to be self

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sufficient for seven days in anticipation of roads being cut off were dispatched to key hubs along the South Coast on 31 October.

In Port au Prince, where people in camps are acutely vulnerable to both wind and rain, all stocks of rope and tarpaulin were mobilised for distribution in camps on 31 October, to help camp residents tie down their property. Information campaigns have been scaled up to raise awareness of warnings and the need to prepare, and where possible people are being moved into any available transitional shelters. The Direction Protection Civile, the government body responsible for disaster response, has begun advising those in camps, in the South and in flood prone areas across the country, to seek shelter with friends and family in secure houses as the best way to protect themselves.

Planning for the impact of Hurricane Tomas also includes continuing to manage and incorporate the ongoing response to the cholera, as well as the response to the earthquake. Plans for management of cholera patients during a storm were being finalized today, as cholera treatment centres are not hurricane proof. Chlorine levels in water supplied to the camps, and to the general supply in Port au Prince, have already been increased, and public information campaigns are being scaled up, particularly in areas under threat from Hurricane Tomas.

“This storm is approaching at a time when aid agencies in Haiti are already stretched to the limit,” said Mr. Fisher “As well as preparing for a large scale hurricane response we must continue to do all we can to help people across the country protect themselves against cholera – and of course to continue responding to the ongoing needs of earthquake survivors. We will be running three major operations simultaneously. The humanitarian challenges involved are among the most complex I have seen in my entire career.”