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# The U.S. Military Response to the 2010 Haiti Earthquake

Considerations for Army Leaders

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## Summary

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The 7.0-magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, collapsed 100,000 structures, damaged 200,000 more, killed more than 316,000 people, injured 300,000 others, and displaced more than 1 million people. It virtually decapitated the Haitian government, destroying the presidential palace and 14 of 16 government ministries and claiming the lives of numerous government officials and employees, as well as the head of mission of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) and his principal deputy.

Shortly after the earthquake, surviving officials of the government of Haiti (GoH) made an urgent request for U.S. assistance. In reply, President Barack Obama promised U.S. support, directing a “whole-of-government” response led by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) with significant support from the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) through U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). Selected U.S. military elements began mobilizing immediately, and, on January 14, SOUTHCOM established Joint Task Force (JTF)–Haiti (JTF-Haiti) to provide U.S. military support to the international response and relief effort through Operation Unified Response. U.S. Army forces constituted a principal component of JTF-Haiti. Operation Unified Response rendered the stricken nation humanitarian assistance (HA) and disaster relief (DR) until June 1, 2010, when JTF-Haiti stood down and all remaining U.S. forces were withdrawn except for a small coordination cell.

This report examines how JTF-Haiti supported the HA/DR effort in Haiti. It focuses on how JTF-Haiti was organized, how it

conducted Operation Unified Response, and how the Army supported that effort. The analysis includes a review of existing authorities and organizations and explains how JTF-Haiti fit into the U.S. “whole-of-government” approach, as well as the international response. The purpose of the study was to assess the effectiveness of JTF-Haiti, with the goal of informing the U.S. Army on how to best prepare for and support future HA/DR operations.

The study revealed that JTF-Haiti provided prompt assistance to many thousands of earthquake victims in a DR operation of enormous size and complexity. The operation was unquestionably effective in that many more lives would doubtless have been lost without the assistance of JTF-Haiti. The speed that made Operation Unified Response successful may have been obtained at some cost in efficiency and acceptance of risk, but those costs and risks were mitigated by the decisive leadership provided by the JTF-Haiti commander, LTG P. K. (Ken) Keen, and a serendipitous set of circumstances favoring the relief effort. Those circumstances included General Keen’s presence in Haiti when the disaster occurred; his long-standing, positive professional relationship with the MINUSTAH military commander; the survival of the U.S. ambassador’s residence and U.S. Embassy in Haiti, with their communication equipment intact; and the availability of key U.S. Army capabilities for immediate deployment to Haiti.

## **How the United States Responded at the National Level**

The levels of damage and human suffering from the Haiti earthquake seriously complicated U.S. efforts to render HA/DR. President Obama immediately pledged U.S. support and designated USAID as lead federal agency for coordinating the U.S. response. The USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) stood up a Response Management Team on January 12, the day of the earthquake, and deployed a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to Haiti the following day. On January 14, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued an execute order authorizing U.S. military forces to commence operations,

and SOUTHCOM stood up JTF-Haiti and appointed SOUTHCOM Military Deputy Commander, General Keen, as its commander.

Given the magnitude of the disaster and the whole-of-government approach directed by the President, the White House and National Security Council took an active role in providing policy direction, and an interagency task force was assembled in Washington to coordinate interdepartmental efforts. The State Department was significantly involved in executing policy direction from the White House and ensuring that appropriate funding was available to U.S. entities. Meanwhile, USAID stood up an Office of the Response Coordinator in Haiti to help coordinate interagency efforts on the ground. And although State and Defense were the most-prominent departments supporting relief operations, numerous other departments and agencies were also heavily involved in the effort.

## **The U.S. Military Response to the Haiti Earthquake**

The response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake was the U.S. military's largest international DR effort in history, and the U.S. military was the single largest contributor to the overall effort in terms of personnel and capabilities. The response was tailored to the conditions present on the ground in Haiti at the time of the disaster. Because MINUSTAH was already conducting substantial security and stability operations there, U.S. leaders, in consultation with United Nations (UN) officials and the GoH, decided that SOUTHCOM would create JTF-Haiti as a separate U.S. entity instead of establishing an additional *combined* JTF (CJTF; sometimes also called a coalition JTF) that might lead to confusion over roles and authorities or undermine MINUSTAH's credibility. JTF-Haiti would carry out Operation Unified Response in coordination with MINUSTAH.

### **Establishing Joint Task Force–Haiti**

Within hours of the earthquake, DoD sent a warning order to SOUTHCOM and supporting organizations to prepare for HA/DR operations. This prompted a series of immediate actions in

SOUTHCOM and other military headquarters. General Keen was visiting the residence of U.S. Ambassador to Haiti Kenneth H. Merten at the time of the quake, and he and Ambassador Merten began relaying communications between the GoH, the U.S. government, and SOUTHCOM from the onset of the disaster. After receiving the GoH request for assistance, General Keen immediately began requesting the deployment of U.S. military forces and coordinating U.S. military efforts with other countries and relief organizations. Given his presence and direct involvement, General Keen was appointed commander of JTF-Haiti when it was stood up two days later. In his discussions with the GoH, SOUTHCOM, and UN representatives in Haiti, it was agreed that MINUSTAH would continue to provide security and stability and that JTF-Haiti would focus on providing HA/DR. These efforts faced immediate challenges. The major airports and seaports had been destroyed, and streets in the nation's capital, Port-au-Prince, were choked with rubble.

Because of the magnitude of the disaster and the urgency of response, General Keen chose not to wait for the formal process for determining requirements and tailoring forces for HA/DR, and no formal assessment was done at the beginning of Operation Unified Response. Instead, General Keen relied on his judgment as a senior U.S. military commander and implemented verbal orders of commanding officer (VOCOs) to assemble the capabilities and resources he believed he would need to begin operations. The first units assigned to JTF-Haiti included several U.S. naval vessels and the Global Response Force (GRF).<sup>1</sup> Before those units began arriving on January 14, the Air Force Special Operations Command 1st Special Operations Wing reopened Haiti's international airport. U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) vessels also arrived on the scene early and began delivering emergency supplies and evacuating U.S. citizens. The flow of forces increased between

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<sup>1</sup> The GRF is a designated U.S. Army unit put on round-the-clock alert for immediate deployment to conduct combat operations anywhere in the world within 96 hours. At the time of the Haiti earthquake, the GRF was 2 Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division.

January 16 and January 21 as such units as the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit and more U.S. Navy ships began to arrive.

### **Phasing in Operation Unified Response**

The original execute order for the conduct of Operation Unified Response envisioned five distinct phases for the U.S. military HA/DR operations in Haiti:

- phase I (initial response)
- phase II (relief operations)
- phase III (restoration)
- phase IV (stabilization)
- phase V (recovery).

In phase I, the initial response, JTF-Haiti focused on saving lives, providing relief to survivors, and coordinating response activities with MINUSTAH and numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). At the peak of the military response, on January 31, 2010, JTF-Haiti included more than 22,200 personnel, 33 U.S. Navy and USCG vessels, and more than 300 aircraft. During the first three weeks of Operation Unified Response, the VOCO process facilitated a rapid “push” of people and capabilities into JTF-Haiti but also resulted in responders arriving without full situational awareness and direction. Moreover, the lack of any formal requirements assessment may have resulted in additional inefficiencies.

On February 5, JTF-Haiti transitioned from initial response operations to phase II, relief operations, with priorities shifting to assistance for internally displaced persons (IDPs) through World Food Programme sites and continuing collaboration with the GoH, NGOs, and MINUSTAH.

In the middle of March, Operation Unified Response entered phase III, a period of support to the restoration of the GoH. During this period, the JTF headquarters staff was replaced, and General Keen turned command over to his deputy commander, Major General Simeon G. Trombitas. Activities in which JTF personnel were involved expanded somewhat to include preparations for potential

floods and mudslides. However, JTF-Haiti turned over responsibility for many of the support functions it had been performing to partners in the GoH and MINUSTAH.

The stabilization operation planned as phase IV of Operation Unified Response was not carried out. Throughout the relief effort, the citizens of Haiti conducted themselves with admirable order and civility, and MINUSTAH security forces proved capable of handling the minor breaches of the peace that did occur. Therefore, SOUTHCOM and JTF-Haiti, in coordination with MINUSTAH and GoH officials, determined that U.S. forces would not need to execute Operation Unified Response phase IV.

In late May, JTF-Haiti proceeded to phase V, recovery, in preparation for a full transition of duties to the GoH. Over the course of the operation, U.S. forces had been steadily withdrawn from phase II onward, and only a small contingent of U.S. military police and engineers remained when Operation Unified Response terminated on June 1, 2010.

## **Joint Task Force–Haiti’s Coordination with Other Major Actors**

The massive relief effort required JTF-Haiti to coordinate with many government agencies and NGOs, U.S. and foreign. Twenty-six countries provided significant military assets in support of the earthquake response, including field hospitals, troops, military aircraft, hospital ships, cargo ships, port handling equipment, and helicopters. Given the U.S. decision not to establish a CJTF, JTF-Haiti created a humanitarian assistance coordination center through which it could coordinate its efforts with interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and NGO partners. Similarly, MINUSTAH established a joint operations and tasking center (JOTC) to serve as a single point of contact for requests for military or police assistance. The long-standing relationship between the MINUSTAH commander and the JTF-Haiti commander greatly facilitated coordination between the two organizations. SOUTHCOM and JTF-Haiti used unclassified information

and public platforms whenever possible to facilitate the exchange of information across partners.

By all accounts, JTF-Haiti developed good working relationships with USAID and the OFDA DART, as well as with other inter-agency partners. The U.S. military played a vital role in supporting almost 1,000 NGOs in their relief efforts in Haiti, which included IDP camps, food and shelter distributions, and medical facilities. JTF-Haiti integrated well in the systems and processes of the NGOs, especially by providing liaison officers to the JOTC and participating in the UN “clusters.”<sup>2</sup> In this regard, JTF-Haiti provided much-needed support to the lead federal agency, USAID, which lacked sufficient staffing to fully integrate its representatives into the many UN and NGO relief activities under way in Haiti.

## General Observations

Four broad themes stand out in JTF-Haiti’s experience in coordinating with U.S. interagency partners, international organizations, foreign militaries, and the NGO community. First, the Haiti experience reinforces the general notion that, during DR, communication can be facilitated if the different players have relationships already in place. Second, JTF-Haiti’s success in sharing information with other countries and NGOs was largely due to the fact that it did not classify most of that information. Third, because of their experience in civil affairs in recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. Army members of JTF-Haiti appeared to have been well prepared for interacting with

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<sup>2</sup> The cluster system is a means by which like functional-area experts from participating relief organizations regularly gather to coordinated problem solving. It was introduced as part of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator’s 2005 reform of the UN humanitarian relief system. This approach tries to clarify the division of labor among organizations and better define roles and responsibilities within the key sectors of the response. Response efforts are currently organized around 11 clusters: logistics; nutrition; emergency shelter; camp management and coordination; health; protection; agriculture; emergency telecommunications; early recovery; education; and water, sanitation, and hygiene. UN and NGO specialists in each of these areas meet periodically (typically daily) in clusters to coordinate efforts and exchange support and ideas.

earthquake victims in Haiti. Fourth, the strengths and weaknesses of the UN JOTC should be examined in depth to determine whether this is a model that should be used in future DRs.

## Findings and Recommendations

The United States made major contributions to the multinational relief effort in Haiti, and the U.S. Army played a key role in that response, saving lives and easing suffering. But improvements could be made that would reduce the challenges so that future relief efforts might be conducted more efficiently and effectively. These findings and recommendations are offered to the multiple levels of DoD policymaking and direction responsible for HA/DR operations.

### Findings

1. Ample U.S. legal authority exists for the military to engage in foreign HA/DR operations, but the key DoD policy needs to be updated. The version of the DoD directive (DoDD) for such activities, DoDD 5100.46, that was in effect at the time of the Haiti earthquake was significantly out of date.<sup>3</sup> Although that did not hinder the accomplishment of Operation Unified Response, updating the DoDD will ensure that similar missions in the future have the appropriate, current supporting policies and direction.
2. Mass and initiative enabled a prompt, robust response. The JTF-Haiti commander's informal approach to determining initial requirements and his aggressive use of VOCO for force selection and assignment resulted in a high volume of people and resources being assigned to the relief effort quickly, and U.S. military leaders were given significant latitude to exercise initiative in directing the response effort.

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<sup>3</sup> This discussion refers to the 1975 DoDD, which was in force during the response to the Haiti earthquake, and it has since been revised.

3. Planning and coordination shortfalls hindered efficiency. The relief effort in Haiti was accomplished without the benefit of well-established plans within SOUTHCOM for such a mission, and the SOUTHCOM staff was not initially organized to optimize the support that a large-scale military effort, such as Operation Unified Response, required. Moreover, the informal, top-down process that pushed resources to the effort so quickly generated inefficiencies that might have impaired the operation's effectiveness. However, whether such inefficiencies had a substantial effect on mission accomplishment could not be determined because the lack of formal, condition-based planning at the outset of Operation Unified Response made it impossible to establish metrics with which to measure JTF-Haiti's performance.
4. JTF-Haiti owed much of its success to serendipity. Numerous factors contributed to Operation Unified Response's success. Operation Unified Response was defined by a singular set of circumstances that may have worked to the advantage of JTF-Haiti, including the fact that the SOUTHCOM deputy commander was in Haiti and at the U.S. ambassador's residence when the earthquake struck; the ambassador's residence withstood the earthquake, and the communication equipment there remained functional; General Keen was a longtime colleague of the MINUSTAH commander, facilitating early and continual coordination; the GRF was available for rapid deployment to JTF-Haiti; the JTF-Haiti commander had a positive professional relationship with the 18th Airborne Corps commander, enabling him to arrange for the immediate deployment of a much-needed headquarters element to lead the JTF; and many soldiers and marines assigned to JTF-Haiti had a high level of experience in civil affairs and other aspects of working with local citizens.

### **Recommendations**

1. Update the DoDD for foreign HA/DR to better describe the statutory and organizational changes that have taken place since

its last publication and provide important policy guidance to DoD entities and their partners.

2. Create a national framework for foreign HA/DR similar to the National Response Framework in place for domestic incidents. A national framework for U.S. foreign HA/DR could document and guide a whole-of-government approach for U.S. efforts and facilitate related planning, training, and exercises.
3. Ensure that all senior Army commanders are familiar with the guidance provided in the recently published *Department of Defense Support to Foreign Disaster Relief (Handbook for JTF Commanders and Below)* (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Partnership Strategy and Stability Operations, 2011). This handbook should be required reading at U.S. Army intermediate and senior service schools.
4. Consider a standing organization to help develop HA/DR doctrine; facilitate HA/DR planning, training, and exercises; establish HA/DR metrics; monitor preparedness and availability of specialized HA/DR units and personnel; provide a base for HA/DR expertise; assist with interagency, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental collaboration; conduct initial assessments of HA/DR requirements; and maintain historical data on HA/DR operations. Models that could be considered for a standing organization include the following:
  - a. joint interagency task force
  - b. DoD Standing JTF for HA/DR
  - c. Canadian Forces Disaster Assistance Response Team.