

Haiti: What We're Getting Into

AEI Center for Defense Studies Crisis Update

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Overview

As our past experiences in Haiti—or perhaps better yet, in Somalia in 1993—should remind us, conducting a “humanitarian relief” mission in a poor country stricken by a natural disaster can quickly embroil the United States in local politics. And desperate people can easily become violent people. That’s hardly a reason to turn our eyes away from Haiti in its hour of need. But it does mean we should keep our eyes open and our heads clear. We should not delude ourselves that we are not “interfering” in Haitian politics.

There have been indications that the U.S. government is acutely aware of the potential for violence among the population in Haiti and is thus taking steps to avoid it—deciding, for example, not to air-drop food aid for fear that it would spark riots.¹ Thus far there have been few reports of looting beyond a few food warehouses, although the mood in the country has been described by UN officials increasingly “tense.”²

Beyond delivering relief, U.S. soldiers and Marines will inevitably find themselves securing the peace. They must particularly work with UN forces and whatever may be left of the Haitian police to ensure that Haiti’s gangs—particularly those loyal to ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—are suppressed. From exile in South Africa, Aristide has said he wishes to return to Haiti, but that can only create further mischief.

U.S. forces will join the roughly 3,000 UN peacekeepers in Port-au-Prince and 6,000 deployed elsewhere throughout the country, who since the 2004 removal of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide have been struggling to counter and suppress the activities of gangs and other armed groups—the primary power-brokers in the embattled nation.³ The security situation in Haiti only stands to become more volatile as the malaise spreads and peacekeepers become occupied with humanitarian efforts; the earthquake also destroyed the city’s main prison, allowing inmates to escape.

Meanwhile, the U.S. military footprint in Haiti has quickly become a substantial one. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has made clear that by January 18 there would be roughly 10,000 U.S. forces operating in and around Haiti. The Pentagon announced earlier in the week that Lt. Gen. P. K. Keen, deputy commander of U.S. Southern Command, will lead the U.S. military’s joint task force in the embattled country.⁴

Given the persistent instability of the country, the deployment of U.S. infantry forces to Haiti is no light matter—despite the fact the U.S. commitment there represents both a strategic and moral obligation. What is equally important to note is that the Haiti mission stands to further strain a force that is already stretched thin prosecuting two wars elsewhere; at the least, it stands to complicate the delicate force generation and deployment timeline for units preparing to surge in to Afghanistan in the year ahead.

See below for an outline of the major units operating in or en route to the country:

U.S. Forces Deployed to Haiti:

- **82nd Airborne Division:** 100 soldiers of Bravo Troop, 1st Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division arrived in Haiti on January 15, with a command and control element of the 82nd ABN's 2nd Brigade Combat Team following closely behind. The remainder of the 2/82 BCT, roughly 3,500 soldiers, are expected to arrive in the country by Sunday evening.⁵
- **22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit:** The MEU is comprised of roughly 2,200 Marines from the 3rd Battalion of the 2nd Marine Regiment; Combat Logistics Battalion 22; Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 461; and its command and control element. The MEU's amphibious readiness group is comprised of the USS *Bataan*, the USS *Fort McHenry* and USS *Carter Hall*, each of which are equipped with heavy-lift helicopters.⁶
- **USS *Carl Vinson*:** The U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson*, equipped with 19 heavy-lift helicopters and a crew of nearly 3,200, is operating from Port-au-Prince Harbor. *Vinson*, the flagship of the Carrier Strike Group 1 created last October, is commanded by Capt. Bruce Lindsey. Carrier Air Wing 17 is accompanying *Vinson* on its mission to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.⁷ The guided-missile cruiser USS *Normandy* and frigate USS *Underwood* also steered for Haiti on January 13.⁸
- **U.S. Air Force:** Airmen and C-130 cargo airlifters from the Air Force Special Operations Command have been operating in Haiti since January 14. MC-130H Combat Talons and a C-130E Hercules from the 1st Special Operations Wing are also currently operating in the country. Additional aircraft, such as MC-130P Combat Shadows, have been dispatched, as well. Moreover, two MC-130W Combat Spears from the 27th Special Operations Wing at Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., are standing by until further notice.⁹
- **Coast Guard:** The U.S. Coast Guard has deployed a Disaster Assistance Response Team to Port-au-Prince and is using a C-144 Ocean Sentry fixed-wing aircraft for aerial reconnaissance. There are four major Coast Guard cutters in the region and two more are en route. The Coast Guard is supporting USAID's relief efforts and conducting medevac missions with its C-130, HU-25, and C-144 fixed-wing aircraft and HH-60 and HH-65 helicopters deployed throughout the region.¹⁰

¹ Yochi Dreazen, "U.S. Carrier Carl Vinson Joins Relief Efforts," *Wall Street Journal*. January 15, 2010. Available at: <http://blogs.wsj.com/dispatch/2010/01/15/us-carrier-carl-vinson-joins-relief-efforts/>

² Marc Lacey, "Rescuers Race to Find Survivors in Haiti as U.S. Troops Work to Speed Aid Flow," January 15, 2009. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/16/world/americas/16haiti.html?hp=&pagewanted=all>

³ Marc Lacey, "Rescuers Race to Find Survivors in Haiti as U.S. Troops Work to Speed Aid Flow," *New York Times*, January 15, 2010, Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/16/world/americas/16haiti.html?hp=&pagewanted=all>. See also: MINUSTAH Facts and Figures, available at: <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minustah/facts.shtml>

⁴ Pauline Jelinek and Robert Burns, "Mullen: 10,000 troops on scene by Monday," Associated Press, January 15, 2010. Available at: http://www.armytimes.com/news/2010/01/ap_military_haiti_update_011510/

⁵ Donna Miles, "82nd Airborne Soldiers Begin Haiti Deployment," American Forces Press Service, January 14, 2010. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=57522>. See also: Yochi Dreazen, "Three-Star General to Head U.S. Relief in Haiti,"

⁶ "NC Marines, soldiers, head to Haiti – with ABC11," ABC11 News, January 15, 2010. Available at: <http://abclocal.go.com/wtvd/story?section=news/local&id=7217491>.

⁷ Lance M. Bacon, "3 amphibians to leave Virginia today for Haiti," Navy Times, January 14, 2010. Available at: http://www.navytimes.com/news/2010/01/navy_bataanleave_011410w/.

⁸ Lance M. Bacon, "3 amphibians leave Virginia for Haiti," Navy Times, January 15, 2010. Available at: http://www.navytimes.com/news/2010/01/navy_bataanleave_011410w/. See also: "US military moves in troops, ships to aid quake-hit Haiti," Agence France Presse, January 14, 2010. Available at: <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5h1oG3IsGNL34-xBHe5kU2wwkTMVw>.

⁹ "Special Ops C-130s, Teams Provide Disaster Relief," American Forces Press Service, January 14, 2010. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=57512>.

¹⁰ U.S. Coast Guard News Release, "Coast Guard continues support in wake of Haiti earthquake," January 14, 2010. Available at: <http://www.piersystem.com/go/doc/786/453107/>. See also: Donna Miles, "82nd Airborne Soldiers Begin Haiti Deployment," American Forces Press Service, January 14, 2010. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=57522>