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Search teams bound for Haiti stranded in Houston

Search-and-rescue specialists among first contingent heading out

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HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Jan. 15, 2010, 1:58PM



Julio Cortez Chronicle

K-9 search specialist Shelley Swedlaw walks her dog, Scout, at Ellington Field as they awaited departure for Haiti.

As the clock ticks on finding survivors in the rubble in Haiti, 80 search-and-rescue specialists remain stranded at Ellington Field as they wait for a U.S. military plane to take them to Haiti.

The Texans — who have been there since Thursday afternoon — are the first wave of help that could later grow with two military cargo planes and a 600-foot Texas A&M University ship.

It was unclear when the team, known as Texas

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Task Force 1, will be able touch down on the earthquake-ravaged Caribbean nation because among other elements, Haiti's main airport has been besieged by emergency-assistance planes and reportedly lacks the fuel and parking to accommodate them.

Brian Smith, a spokesman for the task force, said the team was waiting for the Pentagon to assign and dispatch a plane to pick them up.

"We are still waiting to hear from the military. We are working on that now," Smith said. "We are hopeful, and anxious to get down there."

Smith said the rescuers aren't dwelling on how the window is steadily closing on the chance to find survivors, but instead is sharpening plans so they can hit the ground running.

Officials estimated tens of thousands of people died as a result of the earthquake that shook Haiti on Tuesday.

With federal approval, Gov. Rick Perry dispatched the rescuers, who are trained to find people in collapsed buildings.

The governor said he was waiting for additional permission from the Obama administration before sending more help — from medication and bedding to 15,000 body bags and two refrigerated mortuary trailers.

"Texas is standing by to deliver much-needed

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assistance and supplies to the victims of this disaster,” Perry said of the pending approval, which could come at any time.

The giant C-130 planes belong to the Texas Air National Guard and the ship, the S.S. Cape Gibson, is a recent addition to Texas A&M University at Galveston maritime-training program. It could provide shelter for first responders.

The Houston Airport System is asking people not to bring donations to Ellington Field, saying there is no infrastructure to accept them. Some contributors apparently have mistakenly thought they could send items with the task force.

In addition to the state government, private companies and nonprofit organizations in Texas are coming to Haiti's aid.

Donations have been so overwhelming at the Multi Ethnic Community Center in southwest Houston that officials there have asked for people to stop bringing items by, saying they've filled six tractor-trailers already and their facility is bulging with more goods. They're hopeful to partner with FedEx to ship the items overseas.

Instead, they're asking for cash donations to a variety of organizations that are delivering aid.

Houston resident Charles K. Blake Jr. is a disaster specialist standing by as a member of the next Red Cross team to be deployed to Haiti.

'Tent cities'

The group will focus on vital areas such as food, shelter, medicine, clothing and drinking water,

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he said.

He anticipated “tent cities ... hundreds of thousands of casualties” and a great need for counselors.

“Immediately on the ground, some of our greatest challenges (are) the search and rescue and getting people into shelter,” he said.

“For those survivors, it's a hard time for them right now,” he continued. “A lot of people are in mourning because they've lost their loved ones or they're in despair because they can't find their loved ones.”

Other immediate priorities include identifying the dead, limiting the spread of disease and devising shelter plans.

He predicted the first three weeks will be the toughest.

“With Haiti being such a poor country, there's not much of a safety net or something for them to fall back on,” he said.

The Texas task force, which consists of civilians from all over the state, includes dogs trained to sniff out people, and listening devices for locating survivors beneath rubble.

While some Texans scramble to save lives, others are involved in recovering bodies.

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Frank Ciaccio, an officer with Kenyon International Emergency Services, said the Houston-based company was asked by an international organization to figure out how to recover, identify and send home remains.

“Each day you don't rescue somebody,” he said, “the chance of finding that person alive gets less and less.”

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