

SUCCESS STORY

USAID Supports Urban Search and Rescue Operations in Haiti

U.S. Teams Rescue 47 People from the Rubble



Photo: Rebecca Gustafson

Fairfax County's Urban Search and Rescue Team conducted operations at the compound of the U.N. Stabilization Mission in Haiti throughout the night of January 13, 2010.

As night fell on January 13, 2010, one day after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck the capital region of Haiti, the USAID-supported Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team from Fairfax County, Virginia, learned that a man was alive, trapped in the rubble, at the headquarters of the U.N. Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH).

As the first USAR team to arrive at the MINUSTAH compound in Port-au-Prince, the 67-person team from Fairfax County took command of the site, organizing themselves and others to begin the painstaking job of freeing the man, a U.N. security officer. The work proceeded slowly, due in part to the composition of the cement, which crumbled into powder with every dig. Using a combination of saws and other hand tools, the USAR team labored for approximately 10 hours, steadfastly yet delicately removing debris and glass in order to avoid injury to the U.N. employee confined in the wreckage.

Finally in the early morning hours of January 14, the man emerged from the collapsed building. With a big smile, he hugged his colleagues and thanked his rescuers. To the amazement of witnesses, he suffered only minor injuries and was able to walk under his own power.

This was the first live rescue of 47 that U.S. USAR teams conducted as part of the response to the earthquake in Haiti. The other USAID-supported USAR teams included Los Angeles County Fire Department and Miami-Dade Fire Department. In addition teams from the Tidewater Region of Virginia, South Florida, and New York City assisted in search and rescue operations. As more international urban search and rescue teams arrived in Haiti, the U.N. methodology for search and rescue came online, and each team was given responsibility for a certain sector of the city. In all, 136 people were rescued by international search and rescue teams over the course of about two weeks.

Search and rescue operations were just one aspect of the U.S. Government response in the aftermath of the earthquake. As of February 23, the U.S. had provided nearly \$688 million in emergency assistance for the people of Haiti.