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Rough Road to Aid

The 12 ocean containers Crowley Maritime managed to get to shore at Port-au-Prince's crippled port late last month provided only a small share of the enormous relief supplies needed in Haiti, but that the goods got there at all may make a huge difference.

The Jan. 22 delivery of the containers through an experimental ship-to-shore operation called lightering was a critical logistics and transport landmark in getting aid to the nation crushed by last month's earthquake.

For aid groups trying to rush in relief to stem a spreading humanitarian disaster, the damage to roads, buildings, the cranes and piers at the country's main port and to the basic distribution networks proved daunting. Although dedicated relief groups such as U.K.-based Oxfam and cooperative agreements such as the American Logistics Aid Network have sought to establish systems ahead of natural disasters, the devastation in Haiti from the 7.0 earthquake Jan. 12 was a grim reminder of the overwhelming physical challenges involved in the most mundane of operations, such as delivering bottles of water.

It was a long week after the earthquake before aid started to move through Haiti, first through the beleaguered capital and only later to villages in the countryside. Goods came in largely through the U.S. military, with an aircraft carrier, military aircraft and helicopters overcoming the obstacles.

"Conditions on the ground in Port-au-Prince are really, really challenging," said José Holguín-Veras, a professor and logistics researcher at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York who traveled to Haiti late last month. "Just navigating the streets is a challenge. We're talking about extreme congestion. All the traffic seems to flow into one major arterial road, which is problematic to begin with. With collapsed buildings, it's even more difficult."

With the military helping to set up operations, the commercial operators that normally serve the island began to move back in, with relief supplies providing the first loads.

Seaboard Marine resumed its calls last week with a roll-on, roll-off ship, the Seaboard Sun, landing at the small port at Lafiteau, 10 miles from Port-au-Prince. The site "has clear roads to the main part of the city," the company said.

For aid groups organizing relief supplies for the country, getting to the roads was tough enough. Port-au-Prince's airport was operational, helped by makeshift air traffic control equipment the U.S. military brought in, but the airport was severely congested even with the limited volume that aircraft could provide.

The impact of the massive relief effort rippled across the Caribbean. The U.S. Navy last week asked commercial shipping in the region to coordinate operations in a designated safety zone in the waters between Haiti and Cuba.

Such advisories are normally issued during times of war or national emergency to keep commercial ships out of harm's way. The bulletin for Haiti was intended to ensure vessel safety, the U.S. Maritime Administration said.

The huge shipments of supplies could not be delivered directly to the port because Port-au-Prince's harbor was wrecked by the earthquake, its cranes toppled into the water and, authorities said, many of port workers had died in the disaster.

Crowley on Jan. 21 delivered 56 loaded 20-foot containers of aid, mostly bottled water and the packaged meals-ready-to-eat, from Port Everglades to Rio Haina in the Dominican Republic next to Haiti for overland transport.

Under a contract with the military's U.S. Transportation Command, Crowley brought the container ship Marcajama to Port-au-Prince and alongside a smaller shallow-draft owned by G&G Shipping. The larger ship used its own on-board cranes to load containers onto the landing vessel, which shuttled the boxes to the beach for a basic ro-ro delivery.

The "operation was an important milestone in re-establishing direct container shipments into the heavily damaged port," said John Hourihan, Crowley's senior vice president and general manager of Latin America services.

Crowley said the Marcajama returned to Port Everglades to load more containers and was to return to Port-au-Prince last week to deliver the aid via the same operation. Crowley also will bring in two 400-foot-long, 100-foot-wide flat-deck barges, along with two Manitowoc 230-ton crawler cranes in the coming weeks to help speed the transfer of containers by creating makeshift piers at the port.

"The combination of direct shipments into Port-au-Prince and shipments into Rio Haina that are then trucked over the border is now resulting in a steady flow of aid," Hourihan said.

Getting the aid into the hands of those in need remains a challenge. "There are places in Port-au-Prince where last-mile delivery means using motorcycles," Hognin-Veras said.

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