

U.S. Using Relief Mission As Pretext to Occupy Haiti

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The United States is using the humanitarian crisis in Haiti as an excuse to occupy the earthquake-hit island nation, two of Washington's most vocal leftist critics in Latin America implied at the weekend.

To support the massive aid operation following last Tuesday's devastating quake, the U.S. was set to have up to 10,000 troops on the ground or in the waters off Haiti by early this week

But the presence of 82nd Airborne Division troops at Port-au-Prince airport, Air Force C-17s ferrying in equipment, water and supplies and the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson equipped with 19 helicopters off Haiti, along with the news that more troops and assets including a hospital ship are on their way, raised suspicions in some quarters.

"What is happening in Haiti seriously concerns me as U.S. troops have already taken control of the airport," Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said late Friday.

The Nicaraguan newspaper *El Nuevo Diario* said Ortega accused the U.S. of manipulating the tragedy to install troops in Haiti. It said the comments were made during a meeting with a Syrian government minister.

"Haiti seeks humanitarian aid, not troops," he said. "I hope they will withdraw troops occupying Haiti."

Ortega also expressed satisfaction that members of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) – a left-wing regional grouping led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez – were involved in the humanitarian effort. Nicaragua earlier sent 31 military doctors and Venezuela has sent doctors, medicines and food.

On Sunday Chavez weighed in, using his weekly television and radio show to question U.S. motives in Haiti, and accusing it of "occupying Haiti undercover."

"[President] Obama, stop sending troops to Haiti, send doctors," the official Venezuelan ABN news agency quoted him as saying. "Haiti does not need troops."

According to U.S. Southern Command, which is overseeing the U.S. military relief effort in Haiti, as of Sunday military aircraft and helicopters had airlifted 130,000 daily rations and 70,000 bottles of water into Port-au-Prince, with a further 600,000 daily rations scheduled to arrive in the coming days.

To alleviate the immediate need for water supplies, reverse osmosis water purification units were in Haiti to make water, with more en route.

Soon-to-arrive additional assets included more than 2,200 U.S. Marines onboard an amphibious ship, equipped with heavy lift and earth-moving equipment, a dozen helicopters and additional medical support capabilities, Southern Command said.

Amid continuing reports of gunfire, looting and gangs of young men armed with machetes roaming the streets of the stricken capital, the senior U.S. commander in Haiti on Sunday emphasized the importance of the security aspect of the humanitarian operation.

“Security is a fundamental part of humanitarian assistance,” U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Ken Keen said in Port-au-Prince. “You have to have a safe and secure environment in order to be successful.”

“The initial intent is to strategically place some of our soldiers so that they can help with that relief distribution,” Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Michael Mullen told a Pentagon briefing earlier.

“And then obviously we’re all focused on the security piece, as well,” he added. “We very much hope to stay ahead of that, but recognize that there are possibilities that we need to plan for.”

Chavez and other ALBA leaders frequently allege that the U.S. is conspiring to bring down their governments and has plans to intervene militarily in the region.

In recent months they have pointed to a U.S. agreement to use military bases in Colombia as supposed proof of such a plot. The U.S. and Colombia say the agreement is in support of counter narcotics operations in the region. It followed the refusal of Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa – another ALBA member – to renew a 10-year lease for the use of an Ecuadorian airbase for the anti-drug mission.

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