

Haiti to relocate '400,000 quake homeless'

Haiti officials said on Thursday they are relocating hundreds of thousands of homeless earthquake victims out of the capital to hastily set up villages around the country designed to each hold at least 10,000 people.

"The government has made available to people free transportation. A large operation is taking place: we're in the process of relocating homeless people," said Haitian Interior Minister Paul Antoine Bien-Aime.

He said while he didn't have exact figures, perhaps as many as 400,000 people would be moved.

Officials said the government was paying for at least 34 buses to take victims to the south and north of the country from the capital Port-au-Prince, which was largely destroyed in a 7.0-magnitude earthquake earlier this month.

Brightly painted public buses were roaming the city to pick up passengers, many of whom were piling on the vehicles' roofs, desperate to leave behind the rubble-strewn streets and precarious structures weakened by dozens of aftershocks.

It is not clear where the internally displaced people will end up, but officials said they had begun the process -- with local mayors around the country -- of identifying sites for the villages.

Coming amid public discontent over the government's faint performance in the aftermath of the earthquake, the move is one of its first major steps to aid the hundreds of thousands of people left homeless by the disaster.

Haiti's Secretary of State for Agriculture Michel Chancy, tasked with coordinating aid relief, told AFP that the government had "delivered more than 500,000 rations in the past week," and said authorities "aim to deliver 100,000 a day" going forward.

Throughout Port-au-Prince there are "330 food distribution points and 80 water trucks, which carries out two deliveries a day," Chancy said.

Some 500,000 remain in make-shift shelters in the city, and the priority is to relocate them to the camps, or "villages," outside the city for the time being.

The International Organisation for Migration also said Thursday that at least half a million people are living outdoors in improvised camps in the Haitian capital.

Most people had cobbled together makeshift shelters from sheeting, blankets, cardboard or bits of debris, while some had received tents from Haitian authorities or US forces.

The count of those who were homeless or staying outside their homes after last week's earthquake was climbing, a IOM spokeswoman said.

"So far some 447 improvised settlements comprising at least 500,000 people have been identified in this city alone, out of which 350 settlements have been assessed by IOM, the Haitian government and humanitarian partners," the agency said Thursday.

Rescue teams from around the world were combing debris in and around Port-au-Prince for survivors nearly nine days after the quake shattered homes and buildings in the region.

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AFP)