

Haiti Earthquake: US Ships Blockade Coast to Thwart Exodus to America

By [Bruno Waterfield](#)

In-depth Report: [HAITI](#)

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US officials have drawn up emergency plans to cope with a mass migration crisis and have cleared spaces in detention or reception centres, including the Navy base at Cuba's Guantanamo Bay.

The unprecedented air, land and sea operation, dubbed "Vigilant Sentry", was launched as a senior US official compared Haiti's destruction to the aftermath of nuclear warfare. "It is the same as if an atomic bomb had been exploded," said Kenneth Merten, America's ambassador to Port-au-Prince, as officials estimated the numbers of those killed by last week's earthquake to over 200,000.

As well as providing emergency supplies and medical aid, the USS Carl Vinson, along with a ring of other navy and coast guard vessels, is acting as a deterrent to Haitians who might be driven to make the 681 mile sea crossing to Miami. "The goal is to interdict them at sea and repatriate them," said the US Coast Guard Commander Christopher O'Neil.

Raymond Joseph, Haiti's ambassador to Washington, recorded a public information message in Creole warning his countrymen not to "rush on boats to leave the country".

"If you think you will reach the US and all the doors will be wide open to you, that's not at all the case," he said.

"They will intercept you right on the water and send you back home where you came from."

In response to America's closed door, Abdoulaye Wade, Senegal's President, has offered Haitian descendants of African slaves the chance to resettle in "the land of their ancestors" and offered them plots of land.

"Africa should offer Haitians the chance to return home. It is their right," he said.

US Homeland Security officials said hundreds of immigration detainees have been moved from a South Florida detention centre to clear space for a first wave of Haitians expected to reach America's shores. The plans, first drawn up in 2003, are aimed at avoiding a repeat of previous Haitian refugee influxes in the 1990s and the "Mariel boatlift" when as many as 125,000 Cubans fled to the US 30 years ago.

In 2004, following political upheaval in Haiti over 3,000 Haitians were stopped attempting to reach America and officials are braced for greater numbers following the worst natural

disaster in the region for 200 years.

Janet Napolitano, America's Homeland Security Secretary, appealed to Haitians "not to divert our necessary rescue and relief efforts by trying to leave at this point".

Thousands were said to be on the move out of Port-au-Prince on Tuesday as continuing aid shortages and growing street violence drove people from the city to the countryside.

"Prices for food and transport have skyrocketed since last Tuesday and incidents of violence and looting are on the rise as the desperation grows," warned the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Dieumetra Sainmerita, the manager of Port-au-Prince's main bus terminal, said people were selling whatever they had left of value to buy tickets out of the city. "First there were the people who lost their houses. Then there were people who lost relatives. Now the people I see, they are afraid of the thieves trying to steal from them in the night," he said.

Haitian-born musician Wyclef Jean called on the international community to help with the evacuation of the capital. "Port-au-Prince is a morgue," he said. "We need to migrate at least two million people."

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