

Technology comes to the aid of Haiti

January 16 2010, by Chris Lefkow



A photo provided by ECHO, shows an aerial view of houses flattened following a major earthquake that hit Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on January 12. Online maps, mobile phone donations, wikis and a slew of websites are being deployed as telecoms firms, technology giants and startups set aside their rivalries and put the latest tools to work to help the earthquake-ravaged nation.

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"Technology is playing a key role in mobilizing support for the victims of the [Haiti](#) earthquake and also in coordinating relief efforts," said Akhtar Badshah, Microsoft's senior director of global community affairs.

Badshah, in a blog post, said Microsoft had donated 1.25 million dollars

and was working with NetHope, which brings together Care, MercyCorps, WorldVision and other humanitarian organizations with technology companies.

Cisco and Intel are also members of NetHope, which is seeking to establish Internet connectivity for the various relief agencies on the ground helping victims of Tuesday's quake, which left tens of thousands of people dead.

Microsoft said a NetHope Haiti Emergency Center was already serving as a focal point for reports, events, contact lists and collaboration.

[Google](#), besides making a one-million-dollar donation for rescue and relief, offered its online mapping and satellite imagery tools to aid workers so they can better evaluate damage and coordinate responses.

The Internet giant also created a Web page devoted to linking people with charitable groups such as the American Red Cross or Doctors Without Borders.

Apple, meanwhile, was allowing iTunes users to make donations of from five dollars to 200 dollars to the Red Cross directly from their accounts at the online music store.

Millions of dollars in donations to the [Red Cross](#), Yele, a charity set up by Haitian-born hip-hop singer Wyclef Jean, and others have been raised after US mobile phone companies made it easy to contribute money by text message.

"Yele" and "Help Haiti" remained among the most popular topics on [Twitter](#) on Friday as users of the microblogging service -- a vital source of news in the first hours of the quake -- urged one another to give by text message.

US telecom companies -- from AT&T to Verizon -- announced donations for relief efforts, free calls to Haiti or assistance in helping rebuild its shattered communications infrastructure.

"Haiti's need for communications services is extraordinary and urgent," said Julius Genachowski, chairman of the US Federal Communications Commission.

"It is vitally important that people on the ground in Haiti have the communications capacity to conduct rescue and recovery missions, connect with loved ones... and move forward with overall recovery efforts," he said.

Telecoms Without Borders deployed two emergency teams to set up satellite facilities for use by emergency responders and planned another network to allow people to make free two-minute calls anywhere in the world to relatives.

On the Web, a number of sites were posting pictures and messages aimed at reuniting families or locating missing persons including the International Committee of the Red Cross's FamilyLinks.icrc.org and the Haitian Earthquake Registry at haitianquake.com.

Google was offering a "person finder" at HaitiCrisis.appspot.com while an "Earthquake Haiti" group on Facebook was providing a similar service and had attracted more than 186,000 members as of Friday afternoon.

The New York Times was also posting pictures of the missing on its website as was another US news organization, CNN, through its "iReport" site.

The Haiti Volunteer Network at haitivolunteer.org was bringing together

volunteers and organizations while Microsoft and Google were united with Yahoo! and others in a collaborative online wiki project called CrisisCommons.org.

"We collect data like imagery from satellites and information on Twitter or Flickr then distribute it to NGOs who can remix it to fit their own needs," said Sean Gorman, founder of FortiusOne, one of the participants.

Satellite images, for example, can help aid groups trucking in supplies avoid blocked roads or locate victims.

Another online tool, Ushahidi, which was developed to monitor post-election violence in Kenya in 2008 and means "testimony" in Swahili, is also being used to map the destruction in Haiti.

Ushahidi collects information through [mobile phone](#), email or Web services such as Twitter or Flickr and uses Google Maps to create an interactive map and timeline.

"Tomorrow, we will have lots of information coming by SMS because cell networks will be back up," said Ushahidi's Patrick Meier, a co-founder of the International Network of Crisis Mappers.

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