

Aid groups enlist Google to help in Haiti effort

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Children play in a camp set up for homeless earthquake survivors in Port-au-Prince, Monday, March. 1, 2010. A magnitude-7 earthquake struck Haiti on Jan. 12. (AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa)

(AP) -- Aid workers, with the help of Google Earth, are uploading key information onto the Web to illustrate the needs of hundreds of thousands of people left homeless by Haiti's earthquake - an innovation that could significantly boost the ability to respond to future disasters.

The idea is new and relatively simple: U.N. and non-governmental aid officials can log onto [Google Earth](#) from makeshift settlements housing more than 600,000 people in Haiti and provide real-time details about the population and its global positioning.

Although there have been some teething problems, officials believe the

tool could greatly speed relief efforts.

"The humanitarian agencies have some catching up to do when it comes to things like [Skype](#) and hand-held e-mail," said Alex Wynter, a Red Cross spokesman in Haiti. "But in the base camps, we're connected and [disaster relief](#) is going online."

Users with Google Earth on their computer can go to the Web site, <http://www.cccmhaiti.info>, where a link offers a map of many of the 414 tent sites, churches, government buildings, schools and refugee camps that have sprung up since the Jan. 12 tremor that killed over 200,000 people.

Over a normal Google Earth screen of Haiti, blue spots appear showing where Haitians have settled. Some are named by street, zone or landmark, and others are simply numbered as "IDP" - internally displaced persons - camps.

Each blue spot can be clicked on, calling up an information box that gives a site's longitude and latitude, commune and estimated number of families and individuals. The details are updated regularly so that, in theory, charities and government officials can foresee aid shortfalls, and potential dangers such as landslides and floods.

"It is the first time a tool of such sophistication has been deployed in such short order by humanitarian actors after a major emergency," said Jean-Philippe Chauzy, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration, which teamed with Google, the U.N. and humanitarian information body iMMAP on the project.

Aid workers from a number of agencies are already updating the system, Chauzy said.

But it still has shortcomings, reflecting the tangled web of aid groups involved in providing humanitarian assistance in Haiti, as after any major disaster, and older systems for sharing information. Though it's hardly technically challenging, separate pages still must be consulted to find out about the conditions, needs and agencies responsible for helping each group of people.

Aid officials say the information should be harmonized, and made accessible with a simple mouse click on Google Earth once enough staff have been trained and the program develops.

"That's the next logical step," conceded Brian Kelly, a senior IOM official involved in the project.

Kelly said in an interview Tuesday that the project aims to give policymakers and common citizens a better understanding of how complicated aid operations work. While few Haitians have Internet access, he claimed the project would allow people directly affected by future catastrophes to help identify shortages.

"It gives you a quick snapshot: 'Hey, look, there's no water there,'" Kelly said. "When something happens, the initial questions we ask are: 'Where is everyone? How are they living? What services are they getting?'"

Chauzy said IOM mapping experts started the project shortly after the earthquake, with civil engineers and Haitian geographers who had extensive knowledge of local boundaries and street names. The cooperation with [Google](#) was a key step up from previous mapping exercises, which used PDF files that were less user-friendly and less accessible.

Google's offices in Switzerland and Germany wouldn't comment, but U.N. spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs praised the company for delivering

images so quickly after the earthquake, first by satellite and then enhanced by shots from the ground.

"These satellite images were crucial," Byrs said.

She said the site was populated with information from "all existing sources at that time." The U.N. then developed a "common language" for aid workers updating the information.

Chauzy said he hoped the maps could serve a key purpose in coming weeks by helping aid officials identify safer places to house Haitians during the rainy season, when floods and landslides pose a threat.

The system's long-term future advantages are clear. There should be less duplication of aid efforts, greater information for donors asking where their money is going, and less complicated coordination meetings - which aid officials say are often too time-consuming.

"A lot of time and effort goes into logistics. If you don't know what's coming, where to take it, you are in trouble," Kelly said. "We need to understand, not in month three but in week two, where people have moved and what their conditions are. This is going to cut through a lot of bureaucracy."

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