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Business

United to begin relief flights to Haiti

By Julie Johnsson Tribune reporter
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Starting Wednesday, **United Airlines** plans to begin relief flights that will ship water and other badly needed supplies to earthquake-ravaged Haiti and return, red-tape permitting, filled with far more precious cargo: orphans.

The Chicago-based carrier plans to operate about 30 flights to Port-au-Prince over the next month to support global disaster-relief agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, Red Cross and Doctors Without Borders.

United has gathered 50 tons of supplies for the Haitian cause at a hangar at **O'Hare International Airport**, the airline's home hub, officials said.

Getting the goods to the devastated area is a logistical challenge, complicated by the fact that United hasn't operated regular airline flights to Haiti within recent memory, if ever. The carrier will have to fly to Haiti with its own ground-handlers to unload its aircraft and sufficient fuel to cover the next leg, to San Juan, Puerto Rico.

"We'll operate as self-contained as possible," said Joe Kolshak, United's senior vice president of operations.

United's first flight is slated to ferry about 20,000 16-ounce bottles of water donated by **Walgreen Co.** and 50 aid workers to the Haitian capital. If visas and other paperwork snarls are resolved, United plans to return to the U.S. with children from a Haitian orphanage run by two Pittsburgh-area sisters.

The nation's third-largest airline, United is one of several Chicago-area **companies** that are stepping up efforts to aid Haiti as the impoverished island nation deals with a horrific disaster. Reports are putting the number of people killed in the quake between 100,000 and 200,000.

The loss of life in Haiti is comparable to the death toll following the 2004 tsunami that was spread across a half-dozen nations, experts said. That disaster, as well as Hurricane Katrina a year later, galvanized corporations to become more involved in relief efforts. Many companies forged closer ties with humanitarian groups, which made it easier for the parties to coordinate plans and quickly swing into action following the latest crisis. The **U.S. Air Force**, which has taken control of the air space surrounding Port-au-Prince, estimated that the private sector accounted for about two-thirds of the 300 flights to the airport between Wednesday and Sunday.

"In terms of scale, we're seeing very, very similar levels of support [to the tsunami cleanup]," said Joan Lundgren, who works closely with corporate donors as CARE's senior director for strategic partnerships and alliances. "This is a little bit different situation because it's close, but also because we're talking about an urban disaster, a place that people in Chicago can really relate to."

As rescue operations transition to recovery and rebuilding efforts, relief workers report severe shortages of basic necessities such as potable water and food.

In response, Chicago's largest drug makers, Abbott Laboratories and Baxter International Inc., have pledged \$3.5 million worth of medicine and financial relief. Through the **University of Miami**, Walgreens has donated two semi-trucks filled with bottled water, one full of medical supplies and another filled with hygiene products. The drug-store chain also is donating \$100,000 to the American Red Cross and matching employee donations, dollar for dollar, up to \$50,000.

United has urged consumers to donate frequent-flier miles to the cause and has pledged to match up to \$50,000 in contributions made to the American Red Cross by employees. Flight attendants on the first flight to Haiti, meanwhile, are donating their time and working that day for free.

American Airlines has flown seven relief flights to Haiti, each of which carried 10,000 pounds of goods, since the Jan. 12 quake.

"We've ferried everything from diapers to water to food," said Martha Pantin, spokeswoman for the Texas-based carrier, which also has a hub at O'Hare. Like United, American plans additional relief flights to Port-au-Prince, but is scrambling to obtain landing and takeoff from military planners.

But far more aid is needed. "We believe this is going to be a three-to-five-year recovery process," said CARE's Lundgren.

Tribune reporter Bruce Japsen contributed to this **report**.

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