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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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FYI

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Subject: US troops withdrawing en masse from Haiti

US troops withdrawing en masse from Haiti BEN FOX,Associated Press Writers JENNIFER KAY,Associated Press Writers

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) ¶ U.S. troops are withdrawing from the shattered capital, leaving many Haitians anxious that the most visible portion of international is ending even as the city is still mired in misery and vulnerable to unrest.

As troops packed their duffels and began to fly home this weekend, Haitians and some aid workers wondered whether U.N. peacekeepers and local police are up to the task of maintaining order. More than a half-million people still live in vast encampments that have grown more unpleasant in recent days with the early onset of rainy season.

Some also fear the departure of the American troops is a sign of dwindling international interest in the plight of the Haitian people following the catastrophic Jan. 12 earthquake.

"I would like for them to stay in Haiti until they rebuild the country and everybody can go back to their house," said Marjorie Louis, a 27-year-old mother of two, as she warmed a bowl of beans for her family over a charcoal fire on the fake grass of the national stadium.

U.S. officials say the long-anticipated draw down of troops is not a sign of waning commitment to Haiti, only a change in the nature of the operation. Security will now be the responsibility of the 10,000-strong U.N. peacekeeping force and the Haitian police.

A smaller number of U.S. forces ¶ the exact number has not yet been determined ¶ will be needed as the U.N. and Haitian government reassert control, said Gen. Douglas Fraser, head of U.S. Southern Command, which runs the Haiti operation.

"Our mission is largely accomplished," Fraser said.

American forces arrived in the immediate aftermath of the quake to treat the wounded, provide emergency water and rations and help prevent a feared outbreak of violence among desperate survivors. They also helped reopen the airport and seaport.

There has been no widespread violence but security is a real issue. A U.N. food convoy traveling from Gonaives to Dessalines on Friday was stopped and overrun by people, who looted two trucks before peacekeepers regained control, U.N. officials said.

They managed to escort the other two back to Gonaives. There were no reports of injuries.

The military operation was criticized by some Haitian senators and foreign leaders as heavy-handed and inappropriate in a country that had been occupied by American forces for nearly two decades in the early 20th century. But ordinary Haitians largely welcomed the troops, many out of disenchantment with their own government.

"They should stay because they have been doing a good job," 35-year-old Lesly Pierre said as his family prepared dinner under a tarp at an encampment in Petionville. "If it was up to our government, we wouldn't have gotten any help at all."

U.S. soldiers said they had nothing but warm encounters with the Haitian people.

"They're real good people. They just want help," Army Private First Class Troy Sims, a 19-year-old from Fresno, California, said as he prepared to board a flight back to the U.S. "I feel that us being here helped a lot. If we weren't here, things probably would have gotten out of control."

There are now about 11,000 troops, more than half of them on ships just off the coast, down from a peak of around 20,000 on Feb. 1. The total is expected to drop to about 8,000 in coming days as the withdrawal gathers steam. The military said more than 700 paratroopers left this weekend.

Soldiers are now gone from the General Hospital, where they once directed traffic and kept order amid the chaos of mass casualties. There are no more Haitian patients on board the USNS Comfort, which treated 8,600 people after the quake. At a country club in Petionville, where some 100,000 Haitians are living in rough shelters in a muddy ravine, only a few soldiers remain of the several hundred there after the disaster.

Alison Thompson said she was nervous about the smaller U.S. troop contingent.

"Soon we are not going to have any security," said Thompson, medical coordinator of the Jenkins/Penn Relief Organization, which runs a field hospital at the edge of the ravine. "Everybody is just so worried that they are pulling out because it's going to get dangerous."

It was the same concern for Louis at the national stadium.

"If the troublemakers see that there is some kind of force here, they will think twice before they do anything," she said. "They are already getting ready to stir up trouble."

But Ted Constan, chief program officer for Partners in Health, said that the way to address security is to get adequate shelter and other aid to the hundreds of thousands of people who are now stranded in squalid encampments.

"The real solution is to deliver services ... rather than turn Haiti into a military state," he said.

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