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PRESS RELEASE

More than 2,000 Amputees in Haiti, Estimates Handicap International

Handicap International's health team in Haiti, which has been treating massive numbers of injuries, estimates there are now more than 2,000* amputees because of injuries sustained in the earthquake. While continuing to provide emergency assistance, Handicap International is also planning long-term action to treat the wounded and support their recovery.

To provide care for the maximum number of injured people, Handicap International currently has about 30 rehabilitation and health staff split into six mobile health care teams to treat the injured. Staff is expected to increase to around 100 people in approximately two to three weeks.

In Port-au-Prince, two of Handicap International's mobile health teams, composed of rehabilitation specialists, are providing care in eight hospitals, where only the most severe injuries are treated due to the massive influx of wounded people. The majority of operations are amputations. Some patients with closed fractures are being asked to leave until the most urgent cases are treated first. Based on information gathered by Handicap International staff and partner organizations, there are currently an estimated 2,000* amputees in Port-au-Prince.

"The situation in Haiti today is really unprecedented," explained Thomas Calvot, a specialist in the care management of earthquake victims at Handicap International in Lyon.

"This is due to the sheer number of the injured - 250,000 people according to the U.N. - and the destruction of health facilities. In emergency situations, doctors often have no other choice but to amputate. In the massive earthquakes in China in 2008 and Pakistan in 2005, the situation was less critical as hospitals were still working efficiently. In Haiti, no organization is in a position to cover all the needs in this area. We are already working with partner organizations in order to take care of the maximum number of injured people, in a coordinated manner," he added.

With the agreement of hospital officials, Handicap International's teams are providing postoperative rehabilitation care, distributing walking aids and orthopedic equipment and are establishing a long-term follow-up system for patients.

"You must keep your joints moving," Dr. Colleen O'Connell explained repeatedly to amputees in overcrowded hospital wards. Dr. O'Connell, a Canadian physician specializing in rehabilitation, is part of a team of rehabilitation specialists who arrived this week from Canada and the United States to monitor postoperative treatment and follow-up.

"You must do exercises every day to avoid muscular contraction. This is vital in order to fit you with an artificial limb later on," she told patients.

Four other Handicap International mobile rehabilitation teams are working within four of the poorest neighborhoods in the capital -- Carrefour, Carrefour Feuilles, Christ-Roi and Pétionville -- to provide care and distribute walking aids to camps of people left homeless by the earthquake and other vulnerable groups.

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Handicap International rehabilitation experts indicate that the fitting of artificial limbs will be needed on a massive scale. This activity will not begin until March, once amputees' limbs have had sufficient time to heal after surgery. Handicap International plans to produce between 300 and 400 emergency prostheses in the first six months. These temporary artificial limbs will then have to be replaced by permanent prostheses. The organization's goal is to create and coordinate a structure for rehabilitation and artificial limb fitting and build long-term capacity by training Haitian personnel to ensure the project's sustainability.

*This figure was changed from the original estimate of 1,000 amputees, provided on January 25, to reflect the more recent and current estimate of 2,000 amputees, provided on January 26.

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-30-

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Handicap International works to improve the living conditions of people living in disabling situations in post-conflict or low-income countries around the world. Our programs reduce and address the consequences of disabling accidents and disease; clear landmines and prevent mine-related accidents through education; respond fast and effectively to natural and civil disasters in order to limit serious and permanent injuries and assist survivors with social and economic reintegration; and advocate for the universal recognition of the rights of the disabled through national planning and advocacy. Handicap International is a co-founder of the Cluster Munition Coalition and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which was awarded the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize.