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U.N. aviation expert assists 601 st AOC with Haiti Ops

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – While the character and caliber of catastrophic events around the world vary by infinite degrees, one constant inevitably remains the same – a near-insatiable, but immediate need for humanitarian aid.

One man who can attest to this from extensive personal experience is Philippe Martou, the deputy chief of aviation services for the United Nations World Food Programme. He arrived at Tyndall AFB Jan. 24 to assist the Haiti Flight Operations Coordination Center with setting up humanitarian aviation response to the earthquake-ravaged nation.

Overall command and control of the HFOCC falls to the 601st Air & Space Operations Center here at Tyndall AFB, and the 601st AOC is supporting Air Forces Southern and 12th Air Force, which are both headquartered at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz.

“I’m here at the request of the United States Department of Defense and at the request of the executive director of the World Food Programme, Josette Sheeran, to start the integration of a humanitarian arm in the Haiti Flight Operations Coordination Center,” Mr. Martou said.

No stranger to providing such assistance during catastrophic events, Mr. Martou has a wide range of experience. Within the last 20 years, he’s responded to events around the world, from tsunamis to earthquakes to areas wracked with refugees fleeing political turmoil.

Based on priorities established by the Government of Haiti, U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. Southern Command, the HFOCC assigns ‘slot times’ to maximize the efficient use of the Port-au-Prince Airport ramp for all inbound and outbound air traffic.

Since he was in post-earthquake Port-au-Prince when called to the HFOCC, he knew first-hand about the issues of having just one airport open with extremely limited ramp facilities. The main challenge there: accommodating the delivery of essential resources in a logistically overwhelmed environment.

“No one disaster resembles another,” he said. “The main challenge in Haiti right now is the close proximity of a huge number on beneficiaries tightly grouped in one area with only one

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operational airport, limited port access and widespread road impassibility, and it's all happening on an island.”

“As always when you go through a catastrophe, there is immediately a chaos phase, not only at points of entry like ports, roads and airports but for the people as well, and not only the native population, but the entire population involved with the effort to include those coming in to help. There is a lot of suffering all around.”

Working with the WFP since 2001, Mr. Martou said the initial and immediate response to such suffering is addressing all aspects of humanitarian concerns – food, water, shelter, medical care and security.

“Because it was only an air response the first few days, the congestion had planes in holding patterns for four to five hours,” he said. “But through the outstanding efforts of the HFOCC, time has been reduced from one hour to straight through touch down.”

When he arrived at Tyndall, Mr. Martou, a veteran C-130 pilot in the Belgian Air Force, was impressed with what he saw.

“This HFOCC is very organized and manned by highly trained professionals, it's very well done.”

The HFOCC uses a “slot” system to configure air flow, assigning aircraft a specific time to land, offload and take off. Mr. Martou said the system starts with a phone call from a client to get the process started.

Mr. Martou, pointed out however, the phones never actually get to ring, because the the lines are so crammed with callers. Sharing in the use of the phone system is the DOD, the Government of Haiti and other international and nongovernment organizations, all scrambling to get the much-needed aid to recipients. He added there is currently a web-based system being developed to help alleviate this congestion.

From a phone call, the client's request goes to the planning phase where the particular flight requirements are scheduled to move into the execution and reporting phases.

He said the ultimate goal is to “remove ourselves from working on behalf of the Haitian government and hand the slot allocation process over to them.”

For the future, Mr. Martou sees continuing emergency relief aid combined with a stabilization phase – establishing more accessible routes and beginning vital reconstruction.

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Photo Cutline: Phillipe Martou, deputy chief of aviation services for the U.N. World Food Programme, discusses slot time allocation with Canadian Capt. Gary P. Hartzenberg, 435th Squadron. Both men are providing support to the Haiti Flight Operations Coordination Center, 601st Air & Space Operations Center, Tyndall AFB, Fla.