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Amid Haiti's devastation, more missing students turn up, and some are evacuated

By Karen Fischer | January 14, 2010



U. of Miami students were flown to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., from Haiti late Wednesday, a day after a devastating earthquake struck the Caribbean nation. *Angel Valentin, Getty Images*

American colleges are slowly beginning to account for their students and faculty members caught up in Tuesday's devastating earthquake in Haiti, and a handful, including an Arizona State University graduate student whose foot had to be amputated, have made it back to the United States on relief flights.

But other news has been less positive. The University of Virginia announced on Thursday that a 2009 graduate enrolled in a master's degree program in public policy at the university was killed when the earthquake struck during a visit to her family in Haiti. Officials at the University of Texas at Austin have not heard from a graduate student in Haiti.

And Lynn University, in Florida, discovered that three students who it thought were safe remain unaccounted for in Haiti.

Meanwhile, a chartered airplane that ferried University of Miami trauma surgeons into Haiti last night has returned with evacuees, including three Miami nursing students and a female graduate student from Arizona State.

The 25-year-old Arizona State student, who had been in Haiti to work on a literacy program, was trapped when a building collapsed around her and suffered a serious injury to her right foot, said Lisa Worley, a spokeswoman for the University of Miami medical school. The student's foot later had to be amputated.

The woman is one of 11 patients, including eight Americans, from Haiti now being treated at University of Miami- Jackson Memorial Medical Center, Ms. Worley said.

The University of Miami was able to get three flights with surgeons and other trauma specialists into Haiti on Wednesday and another flight in this morning. Although Port-au-Prince's main airport has reopened, the volume of international-aid flights has made it difficult for other planes to land in the country, Ms. Worley said.

The three nursing students were part of three groups of Miami students, about 10 over all, in Haiti, said Margot S. Winick, a university spokeswoman. The other students are safe, she said.

Mournful Wailing

Other colleges also received good news today about students and employees in Haiti. Two University of Florida journalism students working on a documentary in the country are safe. New York University announced late last night that it had heard from one of its two missing graduate students in Haiti, both of whom are safe and well in the Dominican Republic and on their way back home.

Five Virginia Tech faculty members and a graduate student were expected to arrive in Roanoke, Va., Thursday night. Mark Owczarski, a Virginia Tech spokesman, said the group, which had been staying in northern Haiti, took a bus to the Dominican Republic, where they were able to catch a flight to the United States. Officials at the Fletcher School at Tufts University confirmed that seven students and fellows in Haiti to examine commerce trends were together and doing well.

Maryville University, in St. Louis, reported that Charles Gulas, dean of its School of Health Professions, was unharmed in Deschappelles, about two hours from Port-au-Prince. Mr. Gulas, who was on sabbatical in Haiti, wrote on his blog that he had been working to treat patients arriving from hard-hit areas.

"Last night was very quiet in Deschappelles except for the mournful wailing, 'Me We! Me We!!,' or 'Help Me!,' he wrote, "as people find out that a family member has died."

Although eight students from Lynn University have been evacuated to the Dominican Republic by the U.S. State Department, six members of a study-abroad group from that institution -- four students and two faculty leaders -- remain unaccounted for in Haiti. The university had originally believed that three of those students had been located, but the university's president, Kevin M. Ross, said late Thursday night that it had been relying on erroneous information and that "they remain lost."

"This is hard news to deliver," he said at a news conference. "But it is more difficult to hear for those family and friends with whom, only hours earlier, such good news had been shared. I am deeply sorry for that." He added that he was still hopeful that the missing individuals, who were on what was to be a weeklong service-learning trip, would be found and returned to their families.

The eight students who were evacuated will be returned to South Florida on a private plane chartered by an anonymous donor, said Jason Hughes, a Lynn spokesman.

But getting students and faculty members back to the United States may still be challenging.

A spokeswoman at Blue Ridge Community College said officials at the institution, in Virginia, were seeking advice from the State Department about evacuating two students, a professor, and a staff member who were on a service trip in Haiti when the quake struck.

Some institutions were turning to private companies to help pull out students and employees. One such company, Global Rescue, said it had six operators in the region available to assist colleges. All of the operators are former members of military special-operations forces.

Andrea Fuller contributed to this report.