

Two reported dead as earthquakes shake southern Haiti

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Southern Haiti was devastated by a 7.2-magnitude earthquake in August, destroying thousands of homes [File: Odelyn Joseph/AP Photo]

Port-au-Prince, January 24 (RHC)-- A 5.3-magnitude earthquake and a series of smaller tremors have struck southwest Haiti, killing at least two people, sending panicked residents into the streets and forcing authorities to close schools.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the first earthquake on Monday morning struck near the city of Les Cayes, about 200km (124 miles) west of the capital, Port-au-Prince, followed by tremors of 4.4 and 5.1 magnitudes.

Two people were killed, The Associated Press and AFP news agencies reported, citing Haiti's civil protection agency. AFP said a man died when a wall collapsed in Anse-a-Veau, a small coastal town 130 kilometres (80 miles) from Port-au-Prince, while a second man died in a landslide in Fond-des-Negres, 20km (12 miles) further south.

Numerous people also were wounded in Fond-des-Negres, while several houses have been damaged.

Southern Haiti was devastated by a 7.2-magnitude earthquake in August that destroyed tens of thousands of homes and left families sleeping outside in torrential rains. The Caribbean nation is still recovering from a 2010 quake that killed more than 200,000 people.

The country is also reeling from a protracted political conflict that was exacerbated when President Jovenel Moise was assassinated in his home in July last year. Armed gangs have since strengthened their hold on the island, and deadly violence and kidnappings have surged.

On Friday, Canada hosted a virtual meeting on Haiti that included representatives from 19 countries. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that "immediate action" was needed to address the security situation in the country and pledged an additional \$39m in aid.

A donors conference also is scheduled for February, and the United States and other nations are expected to make additional donations.

Meanwhile, Jean Robert Leger, a resident of the town of Pestel on the southern peninsula, said the impact of Monday's earthquake appeared to be minimal. "In Pestel, there is not so much damage," he told the Reuters news agency by phone. "We see that the houses next to the sea that were already damaged have collapsed some more."

Children ran out of school buildings in Les Cayes and "people were terrified", even though there was no damage, according to one resident. Sylvera Guillame, director of Haiti's civil protection agency for the country's southern region, told The Associated Press that the shallow quakes caused panic. He said schools in the area closed and sent children home as a precaution.

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