

Calls for new approach in rebuilding

Tom Roberts | Feb. 3, 2010



A woman sits at a tent constructed of cardboard and a sheet in a makeshift camp in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Jan. 26. According to the government, more than a million people were left homeless by the Jan. 12, earthquake. (CNS/Carlos Barria)

When New York's Archbishop Timothy Dolan tried to describe what he saw in Port-au-Prince, he said the only vocabulary he could draw on was that of faith. "I see a great deal of Good Friday, immense darkness, suffering and death, but I also see glimpses of Easter Sunday."

For the moment, the way forward -- the glimpses of Easter -- is viewed in tiny increments: some rubble cleared, some food getting through to the neediest, securing safe haven for orphaned children; bringing order to what amount to internal refugee camps.

The immediate needs are so great that it is difficult to imagine what will happen to Haiti in the long range, but already the speculation has begun. At a Jan. 25 meeting in Montreal, donor nations appeared to agree to some sort of a 10-year rebuilding effort that carries a price tag of \$3 billion.

According to a report in *The New York Times*, however, the amount was termed "premature" by a U.S. State Department official, and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton appeared to question the order in which the plans were progressing -- with money and a design (200 model communities with schools and health facilities and rebuilt government structures) before a thorough assessment of needs. "We actually think it's a novel idea to do the needs assessment first and then the planning and then the pledging," Clinton said.

In the discussions and reporting about future development in Haiti, a common element is concern over the country's notorious political instability, on the one hand, and, on the other, fears of more outside interference and domination of the country's future.

In informal discussions with ordinary Haitians, filmmaker Gerry Straub, whose reports from Port-au-Prince have appeared in recent days on *NCR's* Web site (NCRonline.org [1]), encountered both reservations about the government's ability to oversee a massive rebuilding project and skepticism about using the aid to primarily rebuild the capital city.

One man, an engineer and factory owner, told Straub that he and others believe the aid will result in only a perpetuation of poverty in a new setting unless there is serious attention paid to developing hospitals, schools and infrastructure in rural areas. Revival of agriculture is essential, he said, if Haiti is ever to address the enormous urban problems created by migration in recent years of hundreds of thousands of poor farmers and others into Port-au-Prince.

Michelle Karshan, who has served as international press liaison with deposed president Jean-Bertrand Aristide as well as current president Rene Preval, believes that a radically different approach from past aid efforts must be taken in the aftermath of the earthquake in order to make progress in addressing the many systemic issues behind Haiti's grinding poverty and ineffective government.

The international community, especially the United States, must change the pattern in recent years of withholding money from the Haitian government itself while relying primarily on nongovernmental agencies to do relief and development work. The pattern, she said, "ends up weakening Haiti's infrastructure instead of reinforcing it." She said the Haitian government "needs to be partnered with -- not dismissed -- if we expect to see real development."

She, too, sees the importance of concentrating new development in rural Haiti. "The reinforcement of outlying provinces creates conditions for Haitians to stay in their towns, keeps families intact, generates food for the nation to be self-sufficient instead of reliant on imports, and takes away the need for the majority to flee to the overcrowded capital in hopes of finding work at an American factory where the pay is not a living wage."

Karshan disagrees with the secretary of state as well as former President Bill Clinton, in what Karshan describes as their "support of building more industrial parks for U.S. factories and incentives in Haiti's capital."

The former president was organizing a massive international redevelopment effort prior to the quake through his own Global Initiative and as U.N. special envoy to Haiti.

Such an approach "will only perpetuate the conditions that have contributed to the depth of the current disaster," said Karshan, who is coordinator of Health Through Walls, a health program in Haiti's national prison, which was damaged in the quake. More than 4,000 prisoners there escaped.

Karshan, who left Haiti just a few days before the quake for a short visit to New York, said, "Haiti is an agrarian country and that is what needs to be enhanced and financed."

John Kozyn of Arlington, Va., a former consultant to Haiti's minister of foreign affairs and to the Haitian embassy in the United States, also hopes that future development will take into account the ideas of Haitians.

He and his wife, Christina, have long been involved in Haiti through their parish, Our Lady Queen of Peace in Arlington, which has a sister parish in Haiti. He said he noticed in his work that often Haitians resent attempts to impose certain kinds of development on them. The parish, he said, supports "a lot of development projects, they're designed by the beneficiaries of it. It's more a bottom-up rather than top-down development."

Whatever happens in the long term, immediate needs may dominate for the near term, and Catholic Relief Services, which has served in Haiti for more than 50 years, is at the forefront of efforts to bring relief. John Rivera, director of communications for CRS in Baltimore, said the organization was overseeing two large food distribution programs. One is occurring at a golf course that has been turned into a tent city for tens of thousands of homeless Haitians. The second uses a network of 50 parishes throughout Port-au-Prince where there are still facilities for registering people for food packages. In all, the agency believes it will end up feeding around 150,000 under two types of programs. One program, provided for families who have means to cook, consists of

grain in sacks that can be mixed with vegetable oil that is provided and that is enhanced with nutrients so that it is considered a kind of nutritional supplement. The supplies can last a family of four or five about two weeks.

A second program consists of packages of ready-to-eat food such as peanut butter, granola bars, sardines and juice, food high in calories and protein, and will feed a family of five for two days. Such packages, assembled by CRS workers in the Dominican Republic and delivered to Port-au-Prince, were used especially in the immediate aftermath of the quake, Rivera said.

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