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Few certainties as Haiti rebuilds

by Chris Herlinger



Food rations are distributed in the city of Petit Goave, Haiti. (Photos by Chris Herlinger)

PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI -- As he surveyed the dozens of tents around him, trying his best to bring some sense of order to the disorder of relocating at a roadside displacement site near Port-au-Prince, community leader Altenor Ronald confessed that he was dazed, angry and anxious.

"We have no food, no stoves, people are hungry," he said in early February. "I'm in charge and I don't know what to do."

In the city of Petit Goave, in a makeshift camp next to the home of the Daughters of Wisdom, a Roman Catholic religious order, teacher Marie Therese Mayard, 65, expressed similar anxiety. When would her school reopen? When would she and others have a chance to eat something other than humanitarian food rations? "We still haven't eaten anything today," she said.

While some of the immediate concerns, like those expressed by Ronald and Mayard, have eased slightly now that the humanitarian response to the devastating Jan. 12 earthquake has become slightly more stable, Haiti's short-term and far-term plight remains unclear and uncertain.

Donors met March 31 at the United Nations in New York to formalize pledges of billions of dollars for Haiti's reconstruction and repair. While a sense of cautious optimism prevails among humanitarian groups that this is the moment for Haiti to find its footing after decades of political chaos and economic impoverishment, there are also worries about how the next phase of reconstruction and rebuilding will proceed.

Of particular concern is how much of a role Haitians will have in the planning and rebuilding, with fears that their role will be overlooked given what some have called the "tsunami" of international assistance that has flooded the country during the last two months.

"It's about planning, it's about talking to the population," Prosperity Raymond, Haitian country director for the U.K.-based humanitarian organization Christian Aid, said recently in Port-au-Prince. "It's a kind of respect."

While Raymond, himself Haitian, is among those optimistic that the opportunity now exists for rebuilding a better, more equitable Haiti, he also underlines the words "respect" and "dignity" when discussing the next steps for Haiti and its relationship with the United States, the United Nations and international donors.

Such watchwords have animated similar concerns from a number of humanitarian and human rights groups as they look ahead to next steps in Haiti.

In a March 2 report critical of U.N.-led emergency coordination efforts in Haiti, the humanitarian group Refugees International said that despite "the impressive collective efforts of Haitian citizens and organizations and individuals around the world, the humanitarian response has fallen short of meeting the Haitian people's immediate needs." The report said that millions of Haitians "are still desperate for food, water, shelter and protection from abuse and exploitation."

Echoing the concerns of Haitians like Raymond of Christian Aid, the report said that the "first step to improving humanitarian programs in Haiti is for the U.N. and international agencies to link into Haiti's civil society network. There is a strong, organized civil society comprised of grass-roots, community-based organizations under umbrella networks, as well as larger, established development nongovernmental organizations."

The report continued, "Developing relationships with Haitian leadership will increase community acceptance of humanitarian, recovery and development programs and ensure that response and recovery strategies incorporate local knowledge and recommendations."

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The report builds on concerns raised by other groups. In a Feb. 23 statement, the Washington-based humanitarian coalition InterAction said while reconstruction efforts in Haiti must be given top priority, funding "must also be pledged for a nationwide development strategy to be implemented by the Haitian government and its partners. If donors fail to support this two-pronged approach to rebuilding Haiti, widening disparities in the overall development will begin to take root permanently."



In a Feb. 25 statement, the New York-based organization Human Rights Watch

warned that it would be unwise to ignore human rights concerns in the response to a disaster of immense complexity.

Human Rights Watch noted that the overwhelming majority of displacement sites have zero security, as they are teeming with people -- in some cases up to 35,000 persons -- and have no one formally in charge of what happens inside or around them. One result: Rape is becoming increasingly common. The conditions in the camps make women particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and other forms of violence, the report said.

Conditions for everyone living in the settlements, where many shelters are made of sticks and pieces of cloth, will only worsen once the rainy season starts, Human Rights Watch warned.

Bill Canny, director of emergency operations for Catholic Relief Services and the agency's former country director in Haiti, said the recent concerns are valid. In an interview, Canny said the aid provided to Haiti from all quarters, including the universal church, has helped local authorities get back on their feet. Still, he said, Haitians will soon need to take over the management function of humanitarian and reconstruction efforts.

He added that Haiti is facing an enormously complex situation with more variables than one can comprehend -- variables that not only include the loss of thousands of professionals in the quake itself but a serious brain drain to the United States and Canada prior to the quake that will not make reconstruction efforts any easier.

Another lingering concern: the effects of the quake on governance in Haiti. The country is in big trouble and the government is an example of that, Canny said. Given the centralized nature of Haitian society, with so much based in the capital of Port-au-Prince, the loss of so many government officials took a serious toll.

Presidential elections planned for November, he said, could prove a crucial test for what comes next. You have to reinvent the political dynamic in Haiti, said Canny, who called himself cautiously optimistic on this score. People sense there is an opportunity up and down the line. People in Haiti live with a sense of hope; it's kind of an innate sense. Yes, there is a sense of tragedy now, but there is also a sense this can be time of rebirth.

Part of that rebirth will need to focus on long-term human rights issues that are not going away because of Haiti's present realities, said Natasha Fain, staff attorney for the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability.

The center has litigated cases on human rights abuses in Latin America, including those involving perpetrators of abuses in El Salvador and Haiti. Just weeks before the quake, the center lauded a decision

by the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in New York, upholding a \$19 million judgment against Emmanuel "Toto" Constant, a leader of a particularly notorious Haitian death squad. That case was an example, Fain said, of a chapter in recent Haitian history subsequently overlooked in the rush to respond to a catastrophic emergency.

While the obvious immediate needs in Haiti center on food, shelter and security, Fain said in an interview that eventually "we have to focus on the rule of law as part of reconstruction efforts."

"It's making a society someplace where it's possible to have the normal functions of citizenship," she said. "A good standard of life includes the rule of law."

Haitians like Raymond agree, but they are still preoccupied with the next few months -- months of continued focus on providing food, shelter and sanitation. "There are a lot of things to address right now," Raymond said. "But the continued priorities are to support people so they have enough to survive."

[Chris Herlinger, a New York-based freelance journalist and a writer with the humanitarian organization Church World Service and a frequent contributor to NCR on humanitarian issues, was recently on assignment in Haiti for Church World Service and the Geneva-based ACT Alliance.]

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