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CRS faces long-term challenges in Haiti

by Rich Heffern



A woman carries a bucket of supplies at a Catholic Relief Services distribution point in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, March 17. (CNS/Reuters/Eduardo Munoz)

KANSAS CITY, MO. -- Last month *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* reported that Catholic Relief Services has used only \$30.6 million of the \$140.8 million it raised after the January earthquake in Haiti.

CRS officials Sean Callahan and Frank Orzechowski told *NCR* at the International Food Aid Conference that Catholic Relief Services has made strides in meeting the desperate need in Haiti since the quake, feeding some 900,000 people and providing food, water, sanitation, shelter materials, and medical care for hundreds of thousands in Port-au-Prince and beyond.

While CRS continues to address immediate humanitarian needs, we are now embarking on a long-term and comprehensive plan of rebuilding and rehabilitation that is mapped out for at least the next five years. This long-term strategy will encompass a variety of sectors, including 8,000 new temporary structures to house as many families, Callahan said.

The huge outpouring of support from Catholics and others in the United States has enabled the agency to

bring life-saving aid, but "Haiti was somewhat different from many disaster areas we've worked in," Orzechowski said.

"The government centers in Port-au-Prince were destroyed. In the recent Pakistan quake, for example, that was not the case," he said. "Most of the city's water infrastructure was destroyed, leaving millions without clean water for their daily needs. We sprang into action, delivering food, water and emergency shelter, and using a variety of ways to provide clean drinking water and improve sanitation throughout a number of camps."

Seventy percent of the people who have been displaced were either renters or squatters, according to Orzechowski. In order to proceed, land rights have to be established, requiring significant government involvement. "Before we even begin to rebuild, we have to demolish the broken buildings and clear debris. But before we even do that we have to assess thousands of buildings in consultation with the owners to see which buildings should be demolished, and then get permission to do so. The problem is that a lot of the land- and property-owning Haitians are moderately wealthy, and judging from the long lines at the embassies, many of the landowners may have left the country. How do you track them down and sort that out?"

"In terms of the two phases of response that CRS typically addresses, emergency and then transitional, we are fine on our emergency response," Callahan said. "We can provide emergency materials without asking who owns the land. We can provide an immediate Band-Aid solution that will protect displaced Haitians from the elements, while we work out medium- and long-term housing solutions."

The greatest challenge today is the same challenge Haiti faced pre-earthquake -- poverty. "The highest poverty levels in the Western Hemisphere, substandard building quality, poor infrastructure and a poor education system all remain critical challenges," said Callahan.

"We have worked in Haiti for more than 50 years and we intend to remain alongside Haitians for many more years to come."

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