

Haitian president says 170,000 bodies recovered

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Haiti's President René Préval told a press conference Wednesday that some 170,000 bodies have been recovered since the January 12 earthquake. Many bodies still remain in the rubble, while many others have been buried without being counted by the government. Estimates of the total number of dead range as high as 300,000.

More than two weeks after the disaster, the majority of its surviving victims have yet to receive any significant aid.

Préval was virtually invisible, as far as the Haitian population was concerned, in the first two weeks following the earthquake and has become the object of popular contempt because of his apparent impotence and irrelevance, even as the US military has assumed effective control of the country.

The Wednesday press conference appeared to be aimed at countering this image. He dismissed a question as to whether Washington has imposed what amounts to a protectorate over Haiti, claiming improbably that the presence of over 15,000 US military personnel and their unilateral assumption of control over the country's airports and port facilities had had no effect on Haitian sovereignty.

He said that he was transferring his offices, which had been set up in a police station on the edge of the US-occupied airport, to the grounds of the collapsed National Palace, a site that has also been secured by US paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division, but which is nearer to one of the biggest makeshift encampments formed by homeless Port-au-Prince residents.

The president also announced that the government was postponing indefinitely national legislative elections that had been set for February 28. Prior to the earthquake, the government had banned from participation in the vote the Fanmi Lavalas party, which supports former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was overthrown in a 2004 CIA-backed coup and forced into exile.

Préval also appeared to be attempting to give timid expression to the mounting frustration of the Haitian people over the agonizingly slow distribution of food, water and medical supplies, even as tons of aid cargo are piling up at the US-controlled airport and even larger stockpiles bound for Haiti have been held back because of the seeming inability to distribute what has already arrived.

"I am not in a position to criticize anybody, not in the least people who have come here to help me," Préval said at the press conference. "What I am saying is, what everybody is saying is, that we need a better coordination."

The inadequacy of the aid effort has led to mounting tension in Port-au-Prince. United Nations troops have responded at recent distributions, where supplies were woefully inadequate to feed the throngs that turned out, by dispersing hungry and homeless people with tear gas and pepper spray.

The United Nations admits that it has so far provided food to barely 25 percent of the earthquake's victims. Part of the problem is that UN troops assigned to distribute the aid do so in a haphazard manner, choosing distribution sites on the basis of security considerations and providing no advance notice on the grounds that it would draw so many people that there would be rioting. As it is, these surprise distributions end up sending many people away with nothing.

Meanwhile, there are reports that food supplies clearly marked as donated are being sold at elevated prices in the city's markets.

"In the poorest neighborhoods of the city, people are still sorely lacking shelter, food, health care and sanitation," Riccardo Conti, the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation in Haiti, told Radio Metropole in Port-au-Prince.

The Haitian radio station described the appalling conditions facing hundreds of thousands in the makeshift camps. "Men, women and children wash and defecate wherever they can. Many sleep on the ground, others are 'lucky' enough to have a mat or mattress. The ground is littered with trash. The days of the survivors are spent seeking food and water; some cannot even find enough to eat. Some camps are better off than others; they have mobile toilets."

Health experts and Haitian authorities have warned that these conditions are threatening to unleash another catastrophe of infectious diseases, particularly if there is a heavy rainfall. Outbreaks of cholera, malaria, typhus and dengue can claim many thousands of more victims.

Préval and other officials have pleaded for 200,000 tents to be rushed to Haiti to help stave off this disaster. As of Wednesday night, however, UN agencies in Haiti had obtained just 3,500

tents, according to Radio Metropole, and no more than 10,000 are in the pipeline.

There is also growing concern over the fate of Haiti's children. According to a United Nations estimate, at least a million of them are now orphans or have lost at least one parent in the earthquake.

Time magazine carried a report Thursday citing Mia Pean, a Haitian-American consultant for the Andrew Young Foundation, who witnessed men in pickup trucks taking away children from the homeless encampments.

"Each time the driver saw a child—especially a young teen—he would stick his head out of the window and shout, '*Manje, manje,*' Creole for 'eat.' Pean says she watched the hungry kids, four or five at a time, hop into the back of the pickup, which then disappeared."

Pean said that most of the children picked up in this way were being taken for sale, either in sexual trafficking, for illegal adoptions or as slaves for wealthy Haitians.

Haiti's Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive said Wednesday that children were being abducted for an even more sinister purpose: to be harvested for human organs.

"A lot of organizations, they come and they say there were children on the streets. They're going to bring them to the US. And we have already reports of a lot of trafficking. Even of organ trafficking," Bellerive told CNN. "There is trafficking for children and adults also because they need all types of organs."

A statistical study carried out by the Los Angeles Children's Hospital and the University of Southern California found that close to half of those injured in the earthquake are children and adolescents under the age of 18.

The results of the study have major implications for relief supplies, given the need for thinner hypodermic needles and children's doses for antibiotics and other drugs used in pediatric care. Emergency medical teams in Haiti have lacked such supplies and have been forced in most cases to improvise, using regular needles and halving adult doses.

Those injured in the January 12 disaster, the study says, are likely to "include an extraordinarily high number of children, more than 110,000, nearly half of the estimated total."

The study estimated that at least 1,000 children between the ages of six and eight had suffered crush injuries, which, because of the lack of adequate and timely medical care, have in many cases resulted in amputations.

The elevated number of child victims is a function of Haiti's demographics. Fully 25 percent of the country's population is made up of children under the age of 15.

At a news conference in Washington Wednesday, Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell indicated that the US military is contemplating a protracted occupation of Haiti and that security remained its primary concern.

Morrell described the security situation in Haiti as "stable, but fragile," terms that frequently have been used to portray

conditions in Iraq.

"We have to be mindful of the security climate there," he said. "We have to provide the kind of security that will facilitate a safe, secure flow of food, water, medicine, whatever it may be to the population."

A number of civilian aid agencies have charged that the US obsession with security and the militarization of the relief operation has hindered efforts to assist the earthquake victims and cost lives. This has extended from the US military's assumption of unilateral control over the airport and giving top priority to bringing in armed troops, to the insistence that both rescue and aid operations could not be carried out in poorer areas of the city—so-called "red zones"—without military escorts.

"We envision that there will be a role for the United States military for some time to come in Haiti," said the Pentagon press secretary, adding that the presence of US troops in the country demonstrated that the military is "a force for good," working "to provide assistance to those who need it around the world."

The US military's aggressive intervention in the Haitian disaster has continued to generate international criticism. In addition to governments regularly at odds with Washington, such as Bolivia, Venezuela and Nicaragua, which have condemned the intervention as a military occupation, the ambassador to Haiti from Chile, which has enjoyed close relations with the US, also condemned the character of the US military operation.

The Chilean ambassador, Marcel Young, told the daily *El Mercurio* that the US military was "unnecessarily aggressive" in carrying out the Haitian intervention.

"They forget that this is a sovereign country and have been unnecessarily aggressive," said the ambassador.

After taking control of the Port-au-Prince airport, he said, the US forces set their "own criteria—first their planes land, and then all the rest."

He continued: "The arrival of those troops was overly imposing. Even if it was positive that they reestablished air traffic control, judging by the level of military presence their demonstration of force has been excessive."



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