Haiti: Three weeks after earthquake, angry protests over aid delays

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Three weeks after the January 12 earthquake leveled most of Port-au-Prince and claimed the lives of over 200,000 people, anger in Haiti over the slow pace of relief and the impotence of President Rene Preval's government has erupted into protests.

The protests came as the government provided fresh figures that once again exposed an even higher death toll. Speaking before the first session of the Haitian parliament since the disaster, Prime Minister Max Bellerive reported that 200,000 people had been "clearly identified" as having died in the earthquake. The figure, he warned, does not include those buried by family members or neighbors or the bodies that have yet to be recovered from demolished buildings.

In addition, Bellerive said that nearly 300,000 Haitians had been injured in the quake, 4,000 of them having undergone amputations. He also reported that 250,000 houses had been destroyed, with more than 1 million people now homeless.

Government workers, lawyers and crowds of hungry people staged demonstrations and protests in various parts of the devastated capital Wednesday as frustration over the failure of the anarchic relief effort to reach the majority of those affected by the quake boiled over.

Hundreds of people ran through the streets of the Port-au-Prince suburb of Petionville waving tree branches and shouting, "They stole the rice! They stole the rice," the Associated Press reported Wednesday.

The protesters said that local officials were charging earthquake victims for coupons entitling them to food aid that has been donated by the United Nations World Food Program.

"For us to get the coupon, we must give 50 Haitian dollars (US$7) so we can get the rice," Danka Tanzil, 17, told the AP.

There are mounting charges of official corruption in the food relief program, even as nearly two thirds of those affected by the earthquake have yet to receive any aid at all. At street markets set up amid the rubble of Port-au-Prince, sacks of rice clearly marked as donated are being sold at elevated prices.

The coupon distribution, targeted to Haitian women, was initiated over the weekend after weeks in which aid had been distributed in the most haphazard and degrading manner. Convoys under military escort arrived without notice near camps of the homeless that are spread throughout Port-au-Prince, throwing food and bottles of water into jostling crowds of Haitian men. Most ended up going away with nothing.

"They are treating people like dogs, just tossing things at them," Séjour Jean Rodrigue, a community leader in a neighborhood near downtown Port-au-Prince, told the *New York Times*. "We don't want anything to do with it."

"I just avoid them altogether," Kellely Casimir, 23, a pregnant mother of three in Port-au-Prince, told the United Nations news agency IRIN. "I have to fight to get food... Parents with children are the ones who are not getting food. People without children are getting the food because they have the energy to fight for it."

The distributions remain chaotic, with US and other troops deployed for crowd control as thousands of people, many of whom have not eaten for days, push towards the food supplies.

Meanwhile, Haiti's Radio Metropole reported Wednesday that "several hundred people marched in the streets of Port-au-Prince this morning" demanding "food and work."

"The Haitian government has done nothing for us," protester Sandrac Baptiste told the radio station. "We can't find work. It does not give us food."

Meanwhile, hundreds of former employees of state-

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owned enterprises that were shut down under pressure from Washington, the International Monetary Fund and other financial institutions protested outside the temporary seat of the Haitian government in the judicial police headquarters.

Most of the workers lost their jobs after the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of Haiti's President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004. They have demanded 36 months pay as compensation. The demonstrators chanted slogans denouncing President Rene Preval. Some in the crowd called for Aristide's return.

The powerlessness of the Preval government was underscored by Prime Minister Bellerive's announcement Tuesday that parliamentary elections scheduled for the end of this month will be postponed indefinitely. He claimed that the vote would be impossible because of the crisis in the country and the damage suffered by Haiti's elections office. The country's Electoral Council, acting at the behest of Washington, had previously banned from participation Fanmi Lavalas, the party loyal to ousted President Aristide.

In another indication of the tensions building up in Haiti, it was reported that a group of up to 20 armed men set up a roadblock last Saturday and attempted to seize control of a UN convoy carrying food. They were driven off by police gunfire. UN spokesman Vicenzo Pugliese said Tuesday that the attack pointed to a "potentially volatile'" situation.

Increasingly, both the Haitian population and aid workers have expressed intense frustration over the delay in getting relief supplies to those who need them. Many have pointed to the fact that supplies are piling up at the Port-au-Prince airport, but not being distributed.

"Aid is bottlenecking at the Port-au-Prince airport. It's not getting into the field," Mike O'Keefe, who runs Banyan Air Service in Fort Lauderdale, told AP.

The US military seized the airport within days of the coup and unilaterally took control of which planes were allowed to land and which were not. In the critical first week, when medical assistance, rescue operations and relief aid were critical to saving lives, a clear priority was given to bringing in more elements of the US military, including combat-equipped members of the 82nd Airborne Division and the Marines.

The airport remains under US military control. If it is still a bottleneck, it is because military occupation and dealing with the so-called "security" problem in Haiti remain Washington's overriding concerns

Washington's ambassador to Haiti, Kenneth Merten, announced Wednesday in an interview with Radio Metropole that 2,500 more Marines will be landing in Haiti within the next few days, bringing the total number of US troops deployed on land to over 6,000.

Over 10,000 more are at sea on warships that have been sent to blockade the country's coastlines and prevent any Haitians from attempting to flee the horrors of the earthquake's aftermath for refuge in the US. More Marines are also aboard these ships, ready to be sent in as reinforcements should rising social discontent turn into open rebellion.

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