Suffering and struggle: Six months after the Haitian earthquake

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Six months after an earthquake destroyed much of Haiti and killed more than 300,000 people, little has been done for the survivors. The promises by the United Nations and the major powers, particularly the United States, have produced only a trickle of aid.

Of the billions promised at a series of conferences, amid much media publicity, only 2 percent has actually been delivered.

The scale of the devastation produced by the worst natural disaster of the twenty-first century still staggers the imagination. The death toll was at least 300,000, and by some estimates nearly 500,000, out of a total population of 8 million—the worst disaster, in terms of the proportion of the population, in modern history. The equivalent in a country the size of the United States would be a death toll of 10 to 20 million.

Virtually all the deaths were caused by the collapse of homes and other buildings in Haiti's urban centers, particularly the overcrowded slums of Port-au-Prince, the capital city. Some 188,000 homes were damaged, according to one survey, of which 105,000 were completely destroyed, along with 1,300 schools, 50 hospitals, the presidential palace, the parliament building and the port of Port-au-Prince.

An estimated 25 million cubic meters of rubble, much of it concrete and steel rods, remains the principal physical obstacle to both reconstruction and everyday life. Less than 5 percent has been removed since the quake, and debris continues to block streets and roads and fills up much of the land surface of the shantytowns that once surrounded Port-au-Prince.

Four reports made public over the past month document the deepening crisis in Haiti.

A United Nations report issued June 19 found that 1.5 million people are living in more than 1,200 tent camps, mainly around Port-au-Prince. The report warned that with the opening of the hurricane season June 1, those in temporary shelter were particularly at risk, especially those located in low-lying coastal areas or along ravines likely to become raging rivers in the event of a storm.

A report from the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on June 29 said that resettlement of refugees was the main problem, with plans for movement of people out of tents and into sturdier structures only in "early draft form." The report said, "While many immediate humanitarian relief priorities appear to have been met, there are troubling signs that the recovery and longer-term rebuilding activities are flagging."

The Senate report criticized both international aid donors, who have delivered only 2 percent of the $5.3 billion pledged, and Haitian government officials, described as being gripped by "paralysis in decision making."

The reconstruction commission co-chaired by Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive and former US President Bill Clinton "has the potential to dramatically slow things down through cumbersome bureaucratic obstacles at a time when Haiti cannot afford to delay," the panel warned. The commission only held its first meeting on June 17, more than five months after the quake.

An assessment issued by the aid group Doctors Without Borders, dated July 2010, notes that the quake destroyed 60 percent of Haiti's existing health facilities, including the country's only emergency trauma center, and that 10 percent of Haitian medical staff either died in the quake or left the country afterwards.

The report found substantial improvements in the delivery of basic health care, food and water as a result of the genuine outpouring of international sympathy after the quake, but a deepening crisis of sanitation and shelter. There is only one waste dump for the capital city of more than 3 million people, and it is "full to overflowing." The tent cities that have sprouted everywhere are turned into open sewers by the heavy rains that began in May.

"By far the biggest threat to people's living conditions is the failure to provide any substantial, robust shelter," the doctors' group declared. "Sheeting and tents were never anything more than a very temporary solution. They have a life expectancy of around six months…. The tents are starting to deteriorate and the rain is exposing the problem."

While medical facilities are no longer overwhelmed with thousands of victims of traumatic injury, these have been replaced by the "normal" patient load of a severely impoverished country. Infections and intestinal parasites are now the most common complaints.

Health care for women is particularly problematic, with a female life expectancy of only 58.8 years in Haiti, and a maternal mortality rate of 630 deaths per 100,000, 50 times the rate in the United States.

The quake brought psychological as well as physical devastation. "Many people who escaped from the falling buildings six months ago are still too afraid to seek shelter in the ruins," the report continues. "The relief effort has kept the people alive but it is not easing some of their greatest suffering. The conditions of life are raw and levels of frustration are increasing."

While millions endured deeply traumatic experiences—loss of loved ones, destruction of homes, severe physical injury, amputations—there are fewer than 10 practicing psychiatrists in the entire country.

The group's Haitian coordinator warned, "There is a staggering gap between the enthusiasm and promises for aiding the victims of the earthquake in the early weeks and the dire reality on the ground after half a year."

A report by the British Red Cross, issued July 8, warned that aid agencies were still providing most of the clean water and toilet facilities six months after the quake, an effort that could not be sustained indefinitely. "We are all stretched to our capacity and simply containing a critical situation, rather than solving it," said Alastair Burnett, an operations manager with the group.

Even before the earthquake, sanitation in Haiti was among the worst in the world, with only 17 percent of the population having access to a toilet, conditions equaled only in war-torn Somalia.

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Mounting social tensions

Several of the reports cited above took note of increased social tensions within Haiti, where a tiny ruling elite of enormous wealth is seeking to maintain its grip over the society.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), a UN agency specializing in housing refugees, has been attempting to mediate growing conflicts provoked by the attempts of Haitian landowners to clear refugee camps from their properties so that they can build on the land or sell it. Of the more than 1,200 camps, only 206 have official recognition and protection. The rest are vulnerable to violent evictions.

The *Christian Science Monitor* described one such encounter in its July 2 edition: "Ralph Stevens Stephen, godson of the landowner of a property in the Delmas 60 neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, which has been used as an unofficial refugee camp since January, recently visited the camp with 10 armed men in police uniforms to coerce the 178 homeless people here to leave. Resident Oxeana Ismael remembers the day that the armed men showed up—with no official identification and driving unmarked cars—and threatened to return with tear gas if the homeless did not leave within 15 days."

Leonard Doyle, an IOM spokesman, told the newspaper he was aware of about 30 camps that have been forcibly evicted or are at imminent risk.

In its report, Doctors Without Borders noted that "frustration and anger are rising because too little has changed in the living conditions since the quake." One spark was the shift from free distribution of water during the first three months to a system of charging fees, which "puts a strain on so many people without jobs and income."

According to an op-ed column in the *Los Angeles Times* June 25, written by Thomas Johnson, aid coordinator for the Danish charity DanChurchAid, the decision to put an end to free water distribution was the outcome of pressure on the Haitian government from the local elite. He wrote:

"Haiti's wealthy businessmen also have a stake in how the reconstruction takes place. A friend described an absurd moment from a recent meeting of a number of aid agencies with President Rene Préval. The president, my friend said, announced that he'd just received a message on his BlackBerry from the owner of one of Haiti's private water companies. The man was concerned that aid agencies were giving out free water to people in camps and said it would ruin the economy. No one in the room knew how to respond."

Johnson's column gives a vivid description of the conditions in the capital city:

"In more than 10 years of emergency relief work, I've never seen camps like those in Port-au-Prince. International standards defining what people are entitled to after a disaster are in no way being met. The Haitian camps are congested beyond imagination, with ramshackle tents standing edge to edge in every square foot of available space.

"With the rainy season now beginning, the crowded conditions and overtaxed public toilets have raised very real concerns about a cholera epidemic. The tents themselves are a hodgepodge.

"Families' first attempts at fashioning shelters have been augmented with plastic sheeting supplied by international agencies. But the makeshift housing certainly won't withstand a hurricane. If one were to hit Port-au-Prince, the death toll can only be guessed at.

"There would be nowhere for displaced families to take refuge in a city where most of the hotels, public buildings, schools and churches still lie in massive heaps of rubble. It's to be expected that cleaning up the rubble will take time. But what is shocking is that it hasn't really started. In four days of driving through this sprawling, heavily populated city recently, I saw only one backhoe in operation."

The aid coordinator notes the contrast between the enormous scale of the social need and the selfishness of the ruling aristocracy:

"Meanwhile, as ordinary Haitians suffer, the elite families of Port-au-Prince continue to live in luxury in elegant homes high above the dusty sprawl. These families have controlled the wealth of Haiti for generations, and many are now profiting from their country's latest tragedy. The aid agencies all need rental cars and trucks, housing, offices, warehouses and local supplies, and Haiti's elite tend to control access to those things. Experienced aid workers have seen this phenomenon before; our efforts to assist the poorest also end up making the richest even richer."

Political aftershocks

The Préval government is the instrument of this elite and seeks to safeguard the privileged lifestyle of the handful of Haitian millionaires. Its indifference to mass suffering and incompetence in both aid distribution and reconstruction planning have been widely noted. One of its few initiatives has been to seek $44 million for prison construction and equipping the Haitian National Police (HNP), money provided by the Canadian government.

Pending this buildup of the HNP, notorious for torture and abuse of prisoners under a series of dictatorships as well as under civilian presidents Préval and Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the principal repressive force in Haiti remains the UN peacekeeping force, MINUSTAH, which took control of the country in 2004 following the ouster of Aristide by a US expeditionary force.

Since late May, there have been clashes between MINUSTAH and the local population in Port-au-Prince. Brazilian soldiers deployed as part of MINUSTAH fired automatic weapons in the air during a clash with demonstrators in the impoverished Cité Soleil neighborhood of the Haitian capital.

MINUSTAH troops and Haitian police invaded the School of Ethnology of the State University of Haiti after a series of protests. They fired teargas and rubber bullets. This sparked a protest demonstration the next day at which the main chants were "Down with Préval" and "Down with Occupation."

MINUSTAH troops fired similar volleys in the refugee camp on the Champs de Mars, near the presidential palace, wounding several children and sending many gas victims to clinics. As many as 60,000 people live near the Champs de Mars, according to published estimates.

The Préval government has scheduled presidential and parliamentary elections to be held on November 28, after postponing the previously scheduled February 12 parliamentary vote because of the quake. Significantly, the first announcement of the election date was made by Edmond Mulet, civilian representative of MINUSTAH, rather than by Gaillot Dorsinvil, president of Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council (CEP), the body responsible under the constitution for organizing elections.

Supporters of Aristide's party, Fanmi Lavalas, have held street demonstrations protesting the election rules, which bar Lavalas candidates from contesting the vote. Large marches were held in May calling for Préval's resignation, Aristide's return from exile in South Africa, and repeal of the state of emergency that greatly restricts democratic rights.

Aristide still retains some popular support, despite the pro-business and pro-imperialist policies carried out in both of his abbreviated terms in office. As throughout his political career, the exiled president looks to US backing, and there is little doubt that he is engaged in intensive backroom

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negotiations with the Obama administration.

One signal of changing political winds is that the street protests were called by Lavalas in alliance with Evans Paul, former leader of the right-wing opposition to Aristide and a long-time favorite of Washington.

Also, the Republican ranking member of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Richard Lugar, publicly urged the Haitian government to permit Lavalas to participate in the November elections.

This suggestion was angrily rejected by Préval, Aristide's former confederate. Préval defended the ban on Lavalas, claiming that it arose out of factional fighting within that party.

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