

Besieged Haitians want to go home



A woman carrying goods walks through the largest tent city of Haitian earthquake survivors. Paul Jeffrey, Catholic News Service

A tent on a main drag through one of the largest tent camps in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, is an ideal spot for Jocelin Benjanor's cell-phone-recharging business. Various phones rest, plugged in, on a table, and power cords hang from an outlet at the top of the tent.

As a bonus, there are benches and a television set in the rear, where women stop by in the afternoon to watch *The Devil Knows Best*, a popular Spanish-language soap opera.

A carpenter by trade, Benjanor found a market niche in the tent camp that sprang up on the grounds of the Petionville Club golf course. Relatives and friends chipped in to help him buy a small generator for the tent, which he shares with Rudy Joernal, a cable TV installer-turned-barber.

While businesses like his give a semi-permanent feel to the tent camps that sprang up after the Jan. 12 earthquake, Benjanor hopes to return to the nearby Delmas neighbourhood, where he lived before disaster struck.

GIVE ME A JOB

What would it take to convince him to return to the place where he used to live? His answer is echoed throughout the camps: He would go back if he could be sure of making a living.

Resettlement of as many as 1.5 million people left homeless by the quake is one of the most pressing but intractable problems facing Haiti as the country struggles to recover from the disaster that killed at least 230,000 people.



A boy peers around the door of a temporary modular shelter built in a workshop sponsored by Catholic Relief Services. Photo: Western Catholic Reporter file photo

"In survey after survey, people just want to go back home to their original site," said Scott Campbell, country director in Haiti for Catholic Relief Services, the humanitarian aid and development arm of the U.S. bishops.

But it is not easy. Many people who owned houses or lots do not have documents to prove it, and official records were destroyed when government offices collapsed.

Others rented apartments or rooms in three- or four-storey buildings, so even if temporary shelters are set up on the site, they cannot house the people who originally lived there.

DRIFTING HOME

While an estimated 700,000 people left the hard-hit capital to stay with relatives in other parts of the country after the disaster, many have drifted back to the city in search of work, further straining inadequate public services.

In a country where 70 per cent of the population lived on less than \$2 a day even before the earthquake, the economics of reconstruction run in a vicious circle. People need capital to rebuild their homes, but with scant income and no chance of a loan, they see little possibility of leaving their tents and returning home to reconstruct.

Campbell said CRS and other aid agencies are trying to break the cycle by focusing on rebuilding neighbourhoods, so people will have a place where they can both live and make a living.

The goal is "preserving the social tissue of communities. We're not just rebuilding housing; we're rebuilding communities," he said.

For some, the earthquake itself has created a livelihood.

In a workshop under a tin-roofed shelter, surrounded by stacks of lumber, dozens of men and women wield hammers, saws and nail guns in a CRS-funded assembly line that turns out about 25 prefabricated two-room dwellings – known as temporary shelters or “T-shelters” – a day.

The workers are learning a trade and earning minimum wage in a cash-for-work program for earthquake victims.

Almost as fast as the wall and roof panels are finished, young men hoist them onto a brightly painted truck for delivery to Carrefour, a hillside neighbourhood where Good Samaritan Divine Ministries, a Protestant organization, helps residents with physical disabilities who lost their homes.

GRACE OF GOD

“I am alive because of the grace of God and the solidarity of my neighbours,” said Prosper Deno, 67, who was blinded by glaucoma three years ago. The house he shared with his daughter and granddaughter on a precarious hillside in Carrefour’s Rosalva neighbourhood collapsed during the earthquake.

While Deno has a roof over his head, his neighbourhood still lacks a sewer system and safe water, and electricity comes from a tangle of overhead wires tacked to a rusty, crooked pole.

Nevertheless, the house is his. Even if earthquake victims erect their shelters on rented lots or in places with land title disputes, if the victims must move, the CRS-funded houses go with them.

CRS plans to turn out about 8,000 12-by-16-foot shelters, though it may make more if all goes well, said CRS construction manager Herb Combs, who worked as a builder and contractor near Denver before joining the reconstruction effort in Haiti.

One obstacle is the rubble that still litters the hardest-hit sections of Port-au-Prince. Nearly 10 months after the disaster, less than five per cent of the rubble has been cleared.

In a drab government office, behind a desk piled high with plans and documents, including a how-to rebuilding guide for homeowners, Jacques Gabriel, minister of public works, transportation and communication, displays a map of the capital dotted with red, green and yellow circles.

TAKING SCORE

Engineers are going door to door throughout the city, assessing damage and marking buildings in green if they are habitable, yellow if they need repair and red if they must be demolished. More than 250,000 buildings have been inspected so far. Most are green or yellow, but the earthquake probably weakened even sound buildings.

Most of the red dots are clustered in the old downtown and adjacent areas, probably because of unstable soil. There has been talk of relocating people to safer ground farther from the hardest-hit areas, but implementation of post-quake reconstruction and resettlement plans has been slow.

Gabriel speaks optimistically, and somewhat wistfully, of plans and hopes for reconstruction.

A Canadian consulting firm is drafting a building code, the World Bank has offered to fund a recycling project, and there are plans for better drainage, wastewater treatment, road improvement, smoother traffic flow.

Post-earthquake commitments from governments and international aid agencies offer an opportunity to make the improvements Gabriel envisions, but the task is daunting.

“There are many things to be done if we are to have a 21st-century capital.”