

Standstill in Haiti: Six months after the quake

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [August 24, 2010](#) issue



THE WAITING GAME: A woman in Port-au-Prince shows her frustration at the slow rate of recovery efforts following the January 12 earthquake. "People are waiting for someone to show the way," said a young Haitian aid worker.

After a five-month absence, parts of Port-au-Prince looked marginally better than when I had last seen the city in February. At least some debris from the January 12 earthquake had been removed. But generally, the city seemed at a standstill.

Many Haitians were focused on the welcome distraction of the World Cup soccer tournament. I often heard the comment that if it were not for the World Cup, the streets of Port-au-Prince would be filled with protesters angry at government inaction. "People are waiting for someone to show the way," said a young Haitian aid worker with the Lutheran World Federation.

At the center of disappointment and frustration is the fact that hundreds of thousands of people remain stuck in tent cities. The call, oft-heard after the quake, to "build back better" is heard less and less now, for very little building of any kind is

going on. The standstill is due to a number of tangled issues, including questions over who owns and who rents land, about whether property owners should be compensated for the rubble they remove, and about whether the government could (or should) declare eminent domain and simply move people out of the camps located in public squares, parks and golf courses.

After the quake people had visions of building new cities outside of Port-au-Prince—a kind of Haitian version of Brasilia—but such talk is scanty now. Haiti has a long history of unfulfilled visions. *The Comedians*, Graham Greene's satiric novel about Haiti in the mid-1960s, includes this assessment: "Haiti was a great country for projects. Projects always mean money to the projectors so long as they are not begun."

Housing is not the only problem. My LWF colleague mentioned that relief supplies have been held up in customs simply because of inefficiencies. When I asked Sylvia Rauo, the LWF country representative, about the problem, she said NGOs have legitimate grievances with the Haitian government. But she then explained what that government faces. The country's entire customs operation is being run out of an average-sized office no larger than her own, housing about a dozen employees.

"There is a real issue of capacity," she said about the losses experienced by the Haitian government—losses that include huge numbers of buildings, equipment and, of course, personnel.

Prosperity Raymond, country manager for the U.K.-based humanitarian agency Christian Aid, said all sides have to be pragmatic right now if they are to ensure "that everyone has a safe and sustainable place to live." He said the Haitian government has to realize that corruption is not going to be tolerated by the international community. "Building back better," Raymond said, "not only means building back better homes, it also means being accountable."

But at the same time, Raymond said, the international community needs to accompany the Haitian state in a reconstruction that could take two decades or more. "I think it's good to push the state," he said. "But they [the authorities] still have to get back on their feet."

Of course, it is not only the government that has to get back on its feet. Day-to-day survival is the order of the day for people like Patricia Pierresaint, 47, who lost her husband, Andre Felix, and daughter Josette in the quake. Pierresaint spends her

days as a vendor, selling cookies, gum and candy at the Place Boyer camp, where she now lives. Pierresaint was injured in the quake and is receiving a small monthly stipend from Church World Service to assist disabled persons during these difficult first months. Pierresaint has used the money to get her small vending business up and running.

She is grateful for the assistance, but she has to think about what she will do to support herself and her surviving four children when the six-month stipend ends.

"You never know what to expect" in the Place Boyer camp, Pierresaint said. Women feel threatened by sexual violence. In such an environment, "I don't have piece of mind," she said. Pierresaint waved off a question about how she felt the authorities had responded to the quake and its aftermath. "No, I'm not angry with the government," she said. "It's God's will."

I cannot gauge how many people shared Pierresaint's opinion on the theodicy question; certainly many Haitians have tried to find cosmic meaning in the quake. The idea that the disaster was divine retribution for the sins in Haitian society was not confined to Pat Robertson. That opinion was expressed by some Haitians too, particularly those in Pentecostal communities.

Others, however, have emphatically rejected the idea of divine punishment. The disaster "was not a punishment," said Kerwin Delicat, an Episcopal priest based in the city of Léogâne, the quake's epicenter. Like other church leaders, Delicat is trying to discern how Haitians can find "a way to take responsibility, as human beings, as co-creators with God, to rebuild and reconstruct the country."

That remains a daunting task. Many buildings still pose a hazard as they perch perilously on hillsides. The numerous tent cities look tattered, as the spring and summer rains have worn down the tent fabric. Residents have built canals and boardwalks to maneuver around the campgrounds' mud and sludge. Moreover, the camps keep expanding. An area north of Port-au-Prince that had been nothing but deforested hillside when I first saw it in February is now dotted with telltale blue tarps and tents.

In many ways, the city seemed to be adjusting to life amid the rubble. But the new normalcy is indescribably oppressive. The simple task of driving across Port-au-Prince can take 90 minutes. I repeatedly heard quoted the dismal estimate by logisticians (later confirmed in a *New York Times* report) that removing all the

earthquake debris from the country would require at least 1,000 trucks working 24 hours a day for up to five years. The same *Times* story quoted a UN official as saying that no country could possibly be "fully functional at this stage after such a disaster." It noted that following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, it took the government of Indonesia, which did not suffer anywhere near the same scale of loss of personnel, more than two years before it was able to move displaced persons out of tent cities.

People show some willingness to cut Haitian authorities some slack, though that sentiment is accompanied by a fair amount of cynicism. "Why would people expect miracles from the government?" asked one Haitian colleague. "The government was barely functioning before the earthquake."

Other observers have been far less forgiving. A June 25 op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* by E. Thomas Johnson, response coordinator for the Danish humanitarian agency DanChurchAid, accused Haitian authorities of lapsing "into the classic pattern of corruption, inefficiency and delay that holds the country hostage."

"Though it's important that the Haitian government is in the driver's seat of the recovery effort, it has not yet stepped up to the job," Johnson wrote. "The government needs to aggressively facilitate imports of needed goods and equipment and allow agencies to resettle both camp residents who are most at risk and those whose homes were not damaged."

Johnson also suggested that old patterns were reemerging, with the Haitian elite, which lives "in luxury in elegant homes high above the dusty sprawl," maneuvering to control the post-disaster reconstruction.

That may be the case, but it is also true that Haitian authorities and outside groups have to find ways to work together. From what I saw, humanitarian groups are doing a good job around the edges in providing the essentials of shelter, water and sanitation. (That aid is separate from the international assistance pledged by governments. Much of that has yet to be delivered, in part because of concerns over the Haitian government's ability to administer the funding.)

"This earthquake was a huge disaster, and we could say, 'We're finished,'" said Ernst Abraham, who heads Service Chretien d'Haiti, a Port-au-Prince-based humanitarian and development agency. "Or we could say, 'OK, it's a new chance, a new beginning.' If we take the second option, as a citizen of Haiti, I feel I cannot go far

alone. But then, the world community cannot go alone and cannot go far without the government's help and backup."

Abraham and others voiced their frustrations, particularly with the way Haiti authorities have discussed reconstruction plans with donor countries—the United States, Canada, members of the EU—more than with Haitians themselves. I heard the refrain "We know nothing that is going on" from many aid workers. The notion that the recovery from the disaster could usher in an invigorated, reborn Haiti has lost some luster. "This 'new beginning' feels like it is proceeding without action to make it real, concrete," Abraham said. "People are losing their faith about this 'new beginning.'"

These frustrations cast new light on a comment I had heard in January from a Latin American humanitarian worker. He warned of the snares posed by Haiti's complex and politicized history. Noting ruefully that Port-au-Prince felt like it was in the grip "of an occupying force of NGOs," he said that Western nations and NGOs "feel like they can come in with their tents, their clusters and their e-mails and think they control events. They can't. Things take on a life of their own in Haiti."

Working in Port-au-Prince has always been a frustrating enterprise, even in normal times. Thankfully, when you leave Port-au-Prince the situation regarding rehabilitation and recovery appears more hopeful. Small-scale housing reconstruction by teams from the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee was evident outside of the city in small towns. Colonial Jacmel, a badly damaged city along Haiti's southern coast, buzzed with energy, in part because of reconstruction efforts by such groups as the German relief agency Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe.

It is probably too easy to contrast the megalopolis that is Port-au-Prince with small towns. Obviously, it is simply easier working and getting around in Jacmel. If you judged Haiti solely through the lens of Port-au-Prince, you might conclude that Haiti is hopeless. I don't think that is true; I met too many talented, committed and politically savvy Haitians to believe that. But it is also obvious that something has to be done about the scale of Port-au-Prince, which is not only too big but is "too politicized a city," as Sainnac St. Fleur, a construction foreman in Jacmel, put it.

The centrifugal force of Port-au-Prince was evident when I returned to Petite Riviere de l'Artibonite, three hours north of Port-au-Prince. In February I had met with members of a community group there that had initiated a food program to help

those who had left Port-au-Prince to stay with relatives and friends. Several thousand had arrived in Petite Riviere after the quake, part of a larger migration of about 500,000 who had left Port-au-Prince in those early weeks. The appeals in Petite Riviere for food, made over community-based radio, were simple: "If you have a family of six people, please donate a goblet of rice."

When I returned in June to see what had happened, I found that about half of the 3,000 who arrived in Petite Riviere from the capital had now left. Of course, many had no intention of staying permanently, and some have homes in Port-au-Prince. Also, humanitarian aid is generally easier to access in the capital.

Still, in a country where even getting a driver's license requires a trip to the capital, the pull of Port-au-Prince remains a central fact of life. "The future is still Port-au-Prince," said Datus Raynashca, 20, who was displaced from the capital with her father and plans to return there. "There is nothing here."

The flow back to the capital meant that the daily food program in Petite Riviere had to be cut back to two-to-three times a week because contributions of food and money declined. "It's like we've run out of resources," said retired agronomist Nicolas Altidor, who helps with the program. Such a cutback, accepted stoically and quietly but with palpable disappointment, is keenly felt. Residents go hungry as a once-flourishing rice industry falters in the face of U.S. rice imports and as small farmers are caught in a cycle of debt as they try to plant and cultivate their crops.

Those and a host of other problems were pushed aside briefly as Haitians followed the fortunes of Brazil in the World Cup. Brazil has endeared itself to Haitians, partly because it reportedly has promised to help train a Haitian team for the 2014 international games. Many Haitians felt deflated when Brazil lost its match against the Netherlands. But the next day, Port-au-Prince's Brazil fans took to the streets to celebrate a loss by Argentina, Brazil's archrival. It was a momentary distraction after six months of loss, hardship and disorientation.