

HAITI ADVOCACY WORKING GROUP (HAWG)

HAWG is a working group of international development, faith-based, human rights and social justice organizations advocating on issues related to U.S.-Haiti policy.

Deplorable Conditions in IDP Camps Continue

Over six months after the devastating earthquake struck Haiti, conditions in the camps that are home to over 1.5 million displaced people are still extremely troubling. Shelter, still not distributed to all those in need, is of the most basic variety, and sanitation is still sorely lacking. Camp residents must face the prospect of forced eviction and even rape. It is no surprise that, in a recent progress report by TransAfrica Forum, based on numerous field visits, it was observed that “[t]he vast majority of camps in Haiti today violate the rights outlined in the UN Guiding Principles [on Internal Displacement].”¹ Before long-term reconstruction can begin in earnest, the urgent problems still facing current relief efforts must be addressed.

Shelter

With an especially active hurricane season already underway and heavy rain now a near daily occurrence, the lack of safe and adequate shelter is particularly worrisome. As Doctors Without Borders recently noted, “By far the biggest threat to people’s living conditions is the failure to provide any substantial, robust shelter.”² Despite the work of relief agencies, who have distributed over 600,000 tarps and nearly 100,000 tents, there remain immense needs. The rain has torn through the make shift camps, ruining the flimsy tents and tarps. Residents often must spend their days and nights standing up, trapped by the rain pooling above and the mud floor below. The life span for these tents and tarps, even absent the weather, is just a few months. In June the Shelter Cluster reported that nearly one third of all tents and tarps “might” need to be replaced because so much time has already passed.³ As time passes, this number will only increase.

Sanitation

The lack of adequate sanitation only compounds the problem. Although sanitation coverage before the earthquake was one of the lowest in the world, a recent report from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies that focuses on the issue, concludes that the sanitation situation “is considerably worse now than it was before the quake.”⁴ The report notes that “the numbers of toilets come nowhere near meeting SPHERE standards (an internationally recognized set of universal minimum standards for disaster response).”⁵ Many of the latrines are open pit and are often not cleared regularly. Given the rain, they are prone to overflowing, spilling sewage throughout the camps. Although efforts from relief organizations have thus far avoided any large scale epidemic from breaking out, the inadequate sanitation situation presents one of the greatest threats of a second disaster.

¹ “Haiti Cherie.” TransAfrica Forum. July 12, 2010. Available at: http://transafricaforum.org/files/Haiti_Report.pdf

² “Emergency Response After the Haiti Earthquake: Choices, Obstacles, Activities and Finance.” Medecins Sans Frontieres. July 2010. Available at: http://www.msf.org/source/countries/americas/haiti/2010/6months/haiti_6_months.pdf

³ “Emergency Shelter Gap – 08 June 2010.” Inter-Agency Standing Committee: Haiti Shelter Cluster. June 8, 2010. Available at: <http://crocodoc.com/JZt4J>

⁴ “From Sustaining Lives to Sustainable Solutions: The Challenge of Sanitation.” The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. July 2010. Available at: <http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/Reports/199600-haiti-sanitation-report-july-2010-EN.pdf>

⁵ Ibid.

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Multiple organizations contribute on a case by case basis to issue or sector specific recommendations and positions expressed in HAWG materials. These materials are not designed to be consensus positions and have not been explicitly endorsed by each organization active in the HAWG.

Food distribution

Although food distribution in the immediate aftermath of the quake reached many of the most vulnerable, Doctors Without Borders reports that “for most people it is still less secure than in their lives before.”⁶ The World Food Program estimates that 2 million Haitians are vulnerable to malnutrition, this is especially prevalent among children. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that in the first three months, before the Haitian government stopped general food distributions, “around 4 million people had received food assistance.”⁷ These statistics, although they sound impressive, do not reflect the reality on the ground, where food remains scarce. Jesuit Refugee Service, who have a significant presence on the ground in Haiti have repeatedly spoken out about the lack of food in the camps. For instance, in the Automeca camp, which JRS manages, they reported in May that “only three food distributions had been made by the World Food Program in the past three months and none since February.”⁸ This is hardly an isolated case. OCHA, while saying that 4 million had been provided with food assistance, also note that “69% of households in large IDP camps suffer from food insecurity,” compared to 52% country wide.⁹ In addition, drinking water, distributed for free in the first three months is now distributed through a charge system. Cash-for-work programs have been initiated because many people do not have money for basic services.

Security

Displaced persons also face significant security threats, from rape to forced evictions. The increase in frequency and severity of Gender Based Violence since the earthquake is directly associated with the lack of adequate shelter, sanitation and food. The camps are densely packed, and tents and tarps provide no sort of protection from invaders. Lack of sanitation is a key driver of this epidemic. There are often too few showers, and they are located too great a distance from resident’s tents. TransAfrica Forum notes that one camp they went to had just two showers for 4,000 residents.¹⁰ The lack of food distributed in the camps forces residents to travel outside the camps, putting them at risk. Sparse lighting also contributes to the overall lack of security. Forced evictions have also been relatively common occurrences. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, the displaced took up camp anywhere it was possible. These spontaneous communities have frequently met opposition by private land holders, in some cases resulting in threats of violence. International Action Ties, who has been on the ground monitoring the situation regarding evictions, released a report on July 14 that concluded, “Despite millions of dollars in funding and thousands of security-oriented personnel—police, military, and protection officers—the government, UN and partners are leaving earthquake victims at the mercy of landowners and gangs.”¹¹

Looking ahead

With an active hurricane season underway and daily heavy rains, there is a possibility that without immediate efforts to remedy the situation, life in the camps will get worse. Fortunately, the situation can be improved. Lack of coordination in the international community, but also between Haitians and the international community, has diminished the effectiveness of the relief efforts. IDP camps often form their own self governance committees, which are then left out of the decision making process by relief agencies. Cluster meetings are often closed to Haitian groups, isolating local grassroots leaders who are aware of peoples’ needs more intimately than any outside relief group. Coordination must be improved between all actors and that Haitian civil society be allowed to take a lead in the implementation of relief efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- End to forced evictions and call on Haitian authorities to immediately designate land for relocation.
- Expedite housing inspections to make it easier to return home.
- Follow UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.
- Source food aid locally, to support local economy
- Maintain free distribution of water and other services

⁶ “Emergency Response After the Haiti Earthquake: Choices, Obstacles, Activities and Finance.”

⁷ “Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Haiti.” Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. July 2010. Available at: [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/AZHU-878SCC/\\$File/full_report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/AZHU-878SCC/$File/full_report.pdf)

⁸ “Haiti Cherie.” Jesuit Refugee Service/USA. May 2010. Available at: <http://www.jrsusa.org/voice/haiti2010/index.html>

⁹ “Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Haiti.”

¹⁰ “Haiti Cherie.” TransAfrica Forum.

¹¹ “Vanishing Camps at Gunpoint: Failing to Protect Haiti’s Internally Displaced.” International Action Ties. July 2010. Available at: <http://www.jrsusa.org/voice/haiti2010/index.html>