

## **Haiti, Six Months After the Quake**

**Half a year following the earthquake, conditions in Haiti are worse than ever. Still, there is “a lot to be hopeful for”, according to Robert Roth of the activist network *Haiti Action Committee* who recently visited the Caribbean island. An interview.**

### **How are the living conditions in Haiti six months after the quake?**

Robert Roth: “During my visit a few weeks ago, I was struck by the absence of systematic aid for Haitians. The food distribution has been haphazard at best. Work is scarce and there are no massive efforts to prepare for the approaching hurricanes. Above all, shelter for the 1.5 million Haitians living in the camps is hardly existent and highly insufficient for the rainy season. Haiti truly is experiencing a humanitarian disaster of the highest order.”

### **In what kind of shape are the refugee camps?**

“Most people are living under plastic, sheets, or tarps – not tents. There is hardly any space between the shelters. Sanitation is mostly non-existent. If you take a look inside the plastic tarps, people are cramped next to each other in narrow spaces. Some sheets are all they possess and these get soaked as soon as the tarp is flooded by the frequent rains.”

### **Over-crowding, bad sanitation, the rainy season: how do these elements affect the health situation in the camps?**

“We spoke with a number of Haitian doctors and medical workers who are running clinics at the Aristide Foundation. There is a real fear of epidemics. The day-to-day health issues are worrying too. Children are asthmatic because of the dust everywhere. Eye diseases, irritations, rashes, and constant headaches are major problems too. The same goes for dysentery, as there is very little potable water. The general health situation is horrific.”

### **Considering these conditions, how are the Haitians you have talked to responding?**

“We visited three camps and met with many grassroots activists on our trip. There is a high level of frustration with both the Haitian government and the international relief effort. Much has been promised, and hardly anything has been delivered.

In one camp, near the airport, residents had not seen any aid of any kind since late February. When we asked them about the Préval government, they said it was a “zero” and did not represent them. When we asked about the UN, they said they just drive by with their guns out. They want food, work and shelter for their families – and they have not gotten that.

Weekly demonstrations against the Préval government and the UN occupation have been growing. One week before I was there, 30,000 people had demonstrated in Port-au-Prince, calling for Préval’s ouster, democratic and fair elections, the end of the UN occupation, and the return of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to Haiti. It’s a charged political situation right now.”

### **In our last interview, you mentioned the high degree of grassroots organizing in Haiti. Have you seen that happening in the camps too?**

“Yes. This is one aspect of the situation in Haiti that goes unreported. In one refugee camp, Camp Mesiane, women organizers mobilized people to demonstrate in front of a Red Cross center, since they had received no aid. They then continued to meet with camp residents to deal with security, health needs and food. This is happening in many camps. It is Haitians helping Haitians, treating each other with dignity in the midst of crisis.”

### **Are there Haitian organizations which are particularly stepping up in the camps?**

“The Aristide Foundation has been providing medical services and relief from the days right after

the quake. From February on, it ran mobile schools in five refugee camps, reaching over 1,200 students. The Foundation created a weekly health clinic that serves 1,000 patients each week. It also has a mental health project in which Haitian health workers are going into the camps to reach out to people who have experienced the most severe psychological trauma. All of this work – doing the maximum with the minimum amount of resources – has had a deep impact.”

### **Are the camps as unsafe as a number of media and relief organizations suggest?**

“Of course there are major security issues when 1.5 million people are living in refugee camps, when the infrastructure is shattered, when communities have been uprooted, and when massive poverty and hunger is the norm. But Haiti is not a crime scene. The vast majority of people in Haiti are just trying to survive.

The issue of “security” is highly politicized in Haiti. It has been used to justify attacks on popular organizations and communities, including violent assaults against community-based groups in Cite Soleil and other pro-Lavalas areas. When “insecurity” is projected as the main issue, rather than the undemocratic nature of the current government or the desperate situation faced by millions of people, that reflects a political agenda.”

### **What about sexual violence, which is rampant in the camps according to various human rights organizations?**

“The conditions in the camps heighten the dangers of sexual violence. It’s a real issue, one that community-based organizations – particularly women’s groups – are conscious of and working to address. At the same time, I believe that some human rights groups have presented this issue narrowly.

There is little discussion of the role of UN troops and the Haitian police force in regards to sexual violence. In 2007, 114 UN soldiers from Sri Lanka were sent home after widespread charges of rape and child abuse. Many people talked to us on this trip about how UN soldiers and Haitian police use access to food and aid in exchange for sex. This amounts to forced prostitution, completely linked to militarism and occupation. Why isn’t this being highlighted as well?”

### **How did the Haitians you talked to evaluate the UN relief efforts so far?**

“After distributing tarps and food in the first few weeks after the earthquake, the impact of the UN organizations is considered dismal since late February. The UN stopped its Emergency Food Program in April, for instance, because it decided it was time to provide “cash for work”. The main presence of the UN is not as relief workers; it’s as soldiers on patrol, pointing guns at people. They are considered a foreign occupying army. Many Haitians feel that the UN is targeting instead of helping them. In the absence of an effective relief effort, the UN presence is a daily reminder that Haiti is being run by foreign powers.”

### **The Haitian political class handed over a great deal of its powers to the Haiti Recovery Commission, which has a mandate to coordinate distribution of all aid for at least 18 months. Who runs the commission?**

“In the commission, big international players, such as the IMF, the World Bank, the U.S., Canada and France, are represented. It is chaired by Bill Clinton and Haitian Prime Minister Max Bellerive. Supposedly, President Préval has veto power over any decisions, but Clinton is clearly running it: [Esquire Magazine](#) has just called him “the de facto CEO” of Haiti.

The Commission is in charge of doling out the \$5.3 billion dollars which were pledged – not given yet, pledged – by UN members states and international institutions at the international donor conference in March. This kind of money will be used to reconfigure Haiti with a fairly classic model: low-wage factory work, a tourist industry, free trade zones with tax breaks for

multinationals, open markets for U.S. goods, the usual.”

**Bill Clinton recently excused himself for the US trade policy during his presidency – which forced Haitian farmers off land and undercut Haiti's ability to feed itself. Was Clinton's move a hopeful change of heart by one of the key players in Haiti?**

“Bill Clinton loves to apologize. While he is apologizing, he is committing new actions for which he will have to excuse himself in the years to come. The pressure to privatize, for instance, continues up to this day in Haiti. The democratic movements are still under attack. The most popular political party in Haiti, Lavalas, is still banned from elections. The tiny Haitian elite is still Clinton’s major economic partner in Haiti. Former President Aristide is still in forced exile. The apologies will have to continue.”

**The Haitian democratic icon Aristide still lives in forced exile. Did you feel popular demand for his return during your stay in Haiti?**

“It is highly ironic that George W. Bush and Bill Clinton can travel freely to Haiti while the twice-democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, is banished. His return is a big issue in Haiti and a fundamental demand of the democratic movement. For instance, over 20,000 women have already signed a petition demanding his immediate return.

How can free and fair elections be held when such a major spokesperson is prevented from even living in his homeland? How can the voices of the majority be heard when their political party is banned and their political representatives are silenced? In a period of such trauma and difficulty, Aristide’s return would provide hope and sustenance. We heard this everywhere, repeatedly.”

**Dramatic living conditions, a democracy smothered, and a two time elected former president banished: is the near future looking as bleak as this list indicates or has your trip suggested otherwise?**

“There are two stories in Haiti which are happening simultaneously. One is the top-down reconstruction led by the US and the UN. This continues the elite model of development in Haiti of the past, repackaged since the earthquake. The other story involves the mobilizing efforts at the grassroots level. This is the hope for Haiti, the real democratic vision that is emerging from the disaster in Haiti. Numerous organizations responded to the quake by very visibly providing relief and support while continuing to fight for democracy. That changed the political dynamics in Haiti. On the grassroots level, there is a lot to be hopeful for.”

*An interview by Johnny Van Hove, July 12, 2010*