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[The following article by Jane Regan is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the July 14, 2004, edition of Latinamerica Press.] A 10-foot-high mound of charcoal sacks heaped at Edmond Pierre's spot on the highway leading into Haiti's capital looks the same as ever. Sales are pretty good. He gets 400 gourdes, about US$12, for each bag containing the dirty black hunks of what were once part of an increasingly rare commodity here: a tree.

Once three-quarters forested, Haiti now has less than 1% tree cover. The deforestation is part of an ongoing environmental disaster that recently killed 2,700 people in Haiti and the neighboring Dominican Republic when rain rushed down treeless slopes and fatally flooded valleys (see NotiCen, 2004-01-29). "I used to clean rooms at the Holiday Inn, but I couldn't survive on that," Pierre said. "I'm not getting rich now, but at least I'm surviving." Pierre's wares are part of what keeps Haiti's wheels turning, or at least keeps people fed. Almost 75% of the country's energy needs are met by wood and charcoal.

Huge trucks trundle into the capital each day, stacked high with firewood, fatwood, and mounds of charcoal sacks. They are used to cook most of Haiti's meals, bake its bread, distill its alcohol and dry-clean its clothes. But not without a cost. On the night of May 23, Caribbean storm clouds opened up and dumped rain on the La Selle mountain range, home to two of Haiti's three state forests. The only problem is that the forests have fewer trees each year. Farmers slash and burn, and charcoal-gatherers and wood-sellers harvest freely. According to the UN, just one decade ago the largest state forest the Pine Forest had 40,000 hectares of trees.

Today only 9,000 ha remain. So when water poured down on the mountains, it also poured off. Walls of water, mud, and rocks thundered into the densely populated valleys on either side of the mountains, washing away villages, swallowing towns. In Fonds Verettes, on the northern side of the range, 1,807 houses were destroyed and another 1,288 damaged. Of the 237 people missing, only eight bodies were found. The rest were covered by rocks and mud or carried downstream to Jimani in the Dominican Republic, where hundreds more died.

In Mapou, on the southern side, water filled the valley, turning cornfields and mango groves into lakes dotted with the tops of trees and houses. The lucky ones escaped by cutting holes through their thatch or tin roofs. Many were not lucky. The water is receding, but the stench of decaying bodies remains. So far, 473 bodies have been discovered. Some 1,300 are still missing. In all, at least 6,000 families with approximately five people per family were affected, according to the UN World Food Program (WFP).

During the first week after the disaster, the WFP airlifted tens of thousands of tons of food with the help of the US-led multinational forces stationed in Haiti since ex-President Jean-Bertrand

Aristide resigned on Feb. 29 amid protests and an armed rebellion. The roads are now finally open, so convoys of trucks can keep delivering rice and other staples to keep the survivors alive.

"We know that there will be a need for our help for many months ahead," said WFP spokeswoman Anna Poulsen. The food aid will assuage hunger for about 30,000 people, Poulsen said. But most of Haiti's 8 million people live below the poverty line. And flood or no flood, some 3.8 million go hungry every day.

Asked how the Fonds Verettes victims were going to cook the WFP rice during a delivery last month, a relief worker just looked down. He knew what the journalist knew: firewood. In addition to allowing most families to cook their meals, charcoal and wood are also among the few reliable cash crops in rural Haiti, where agricultural production has declined as land has deteriorated and foreign-grown products have invaded the marketplace, undercutting local goods.

Experts estimate that up to 50 million trees including hardwoods and fruit trees are cut down every year for charcoal, firewood, and construction. None of Haiti's governments has given the problem much more than lip service. Charcoal is still the cheapest way to cook food, undercutting kerosene and natural gas. And the millions of donor dollars spent on many more millions of seedlings or projects have mostly just provided temporary labor or future fodder for charcoal-harvesters. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that since 1900 Haiti has suffered 49 "climatic catastrophes," 16 cyclones, 26 major floods, and seven droughts, according to UN figures.

Surveying the damage at Fonds Verettes on May 25, Prime Minister Gerard Latortue (see NotiCen, 2004-03-18) admitted drastic measures were needed. "The forest up through here has been completely destroyed," he said. "We have to go and reforest the hill. Until we do that, every two, three, four years after some heavy rain the same thing could happen again."

A new interim development plan drawn up by the temporary government and representatives from the UN, World Bank, and other entities calls for a few steps, including the "conversion" of 30,000 urban households and 1,000 businesses to gas or kerosene, as well as the promotion of "alternative" energy sources. But there is no mention of subsidizing other fuels. That means, as long as charcoal is cheaper, and as long as its sale is allowed, it will probably remain both an income-earner and the fuel for Haiti's majority.

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