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Haiti: As Aid Trickles In, Survivors Step Up

by LADB Staff
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With international-aid agencies unable to organize relief deliveries or being prevented by the US military from unloading supplies at the main airport, Haitian survivors of the Jan. 12 earthquake are organizing themselves. In the capital, Port-au-Prince, and in towns across the south of the country, people made homeless by the quake and living in the streets are forging communities to help deal with the extreme situation. Neighborhood residents are getting together to remove and stack dead bodies to get rid of the smell of decomposition and lessen the threat of disease. They are helping each other search for survivors in the rubble of collapsed building and forming security details to protect themselves from thieves. Individuals are delegated to run errands and search for water and food. Reed Lindsay is a US citizen who has lived in a poor neighborhood of the capital for several years. He is also a news reporter for the Venezuelan television station TeleSUR. Two days after the quake, he reported, "Communities are starting to organize, but they have no resources. Everyone is sleeping in the streets and plazas. They have set up their own refugee camps." Contrary to some media reports, as of day five following the quake, there had been little violence or disorder, despite the extreme deprivation and lack of international aid. Another US citizen, David Belle, who has lived in Haiti for most of the last 15 years, toured Port-au-Prince on Jan. 16-17 and said, "I have travelled the entire city daily since my arrival. Not once have we witnessed a single act of aggression or violence." Haitians pull together in wake of tragedy On the contrary, Belle confirmed the tremendous spirit of cooperation and solidarity among survivors. "We have witnessed neighbors helping neighbors and friends helping friends and strangers. We've seen neighbors digging in rubble with their bare hands to find survivors," he said. "We've seen traditional healers treating the injured. We've seen dignified ceremonies for mass burials and residents patiently waiting under the boiling sun with nothing but their few remaining belongings....Haiti can be proud of its survivors. Their dignity and decency in the face of this tragedy is itself staggering." In the days ahead, this spirit will be sorely tested, but in the long run it needs to endure and grow if Haitians are to find the solutions to their immense problems. Progressive Haitian organizations are starting to re-emerge as members recover from their own personal losses. One of the leading coalitions of progressive organizations is the Plateforme Haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif (PAPDA), which has been working with the Haitian popular movement since 1995 to develop alternatives to the neoliberal model of economic globalization. PAPDA's coordinator Camille Chalmers survived the quake, but his mother-in-law was killed and his house destroyed. On Jan. 15, he wrote about the extreme situation where there is no form of state response and the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) is seemingly unable to organize any relief. Chalmers called for establishing a crisis committee to coordinate aid and to work in close collaboration with the population. New model needed in rebuilding Chalmers also said that Haiti should be rebuilt in a totally different way and that the disaster is an opportunity to make a complete break with the failed development models of the past. "We need a broad movement of solidarity between peoples that makes it possible to overcome illiteracy [45% of the population] and build an effective public school system that is free and that respects the history, culture, and ecosystem of our country," he said. Chalmers continued, "We need to overcome the environmental crisis and rebuild Haiti's 30 watersheds with the massive participation of young people and international volunteers and reconstruct a new city based on
different logic: humane and balanced urbanization, respect for workers and the real wealth creators, subsidized public transportation, parks that maximize our biodiversity, scientific research, urban agriculture, handicrafts and the popular arts." In a similar vein, the Florida-based Miami Workers Center echoed the view of its partner in Haiti, the workers organization Batay Ouvriye, active in factories and plantations since 1994, saying, "Haitian workers and peasants have been fighting for their rights to even the most basic level of existence for decades, while the UN occupying force, the state, and the ruling elites maintain an unrelenting social misery. Now, as Port-au-Prince is in rubble, new opportunities arise for rulers to rebuild Haiti in their own interests and likewise for the Haitian workers and peasants to assert their right to their own Haiti, one where they will be not be forced to live in dangerous buildings and work merely to fill the pockets of elites, foreign or domestic." Thousands of survivors are now leaving the capital to take refuge with relatives in the provinces, representing a reversal of the rural exodus that has overwhelmed the city in recent decades. The population of Port-au-Prince numbered some 500,000 in 1970 but by the time of the quake had swollen to more than 2 million. The magnitude of the terrible tragedy in Port-au-Prince is directly linked to the influx of hundreds of thousands of people who were obliged to abandon the countryside and come to capital to try to make a living. The loss of life from the earthquake, the potential for disease to spread, and the danger that many poor people will be left without water and food in the months ahead are all far greater because there are too many people living in Port-au-Prince. The mushrooming size of Port-au-Prince was caused by the complete neglect of the rural sector by both the central government and the international financial institutions throughout decades, this despite the fact that the majority of Haitians are peasant farmers. PAPDA and numerous peasant organizations are now renewing the call for a new development policy, one that, as Chalmers says, will "build food sovereignty based on a comprehensive agrarian reform, prioritizing agricultural investments that respect ecosystems, biodiversity, and the needs and culture of the majority."

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