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Haiti: Earthquake Victims Face New Trials With Forced Evictions

by Charles Arthur

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Tens of thousands of people made homeless by the Jan. 12 earthquake (NotiCen January 21, 2010) are facing new terrors as police deployed by the government and thugs hired by private landlords have begun forcibly evicting residents from a number of camps across Port-au-Prince.

Forcible evictions of homeless people who had set up camps on any available ground began in late March. Private landlords who wanted the internally displaced people off their land sent in hired men under the cover of darkness to pull down makeshift shelters and tents and drive the occupants out. The first high-profile mass eviction saw police forcibly remove some 7,000 people from the Sylvio Cator national soccer stadium over the weekend of April 10-11. Thousands more were subsequently forced out of Camp Sipot in Delmas 31 and Camp Refugee in Caradeux Delmas 75. Contrary to the guidelines on the treatment of internally displaced people issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), no alternative accommodation was provided. Media reports told of evicted camp dwellers setting up lean-to shelters in bushes on hillside wasteland. With authorities and relief agencies belatedly beginning the process of providing alternative temporary housing outside the capital, in Port-au-Prince some landowners have seen the development as a signal that they can force people off their land and close down squatter camps. Toward the middle of April, residents at the Camp Methodiste de Freres in Delmas 95, and Camp San Louis Gonzague in Delmas 31/33, reported their fears that forced evictions were imminent.

Rainy season brings need to move survivors

More than 1 million people lost their homes during the January 12 earthquake. About half of them subsequently left the capital and its suburbs to find shelter with relatives living in the provinces. The rest – more than half a million people – massed in more than 600 settlement camps in and around Port-au-Prince. These camps were initially composed of makeshift tarpaulin homes and shanties, but eventually international relief agencies succeeded in distributing tents to many of the displaced people.

In the weeks after the earthquake, government officials and aid workers said that nearly all the displaced would need to be moved to carefully planned camps ahead of the arriving rainy season. Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive even spoke of the need to requisition vacant land for constructing new emergency settlements, but such a move never materialized. Then in March, there was a change in policy, with aid officials deciding instead that people should start going home, saying that thousands of houses were still habitable or could be repaired. Continuing aftershocks and the provision of relief supplies to many camps convinced most internally displaced people to stay where they were. In early April, the government and aid officials once again began saying that the approach of seasonal rains would make many camps liable to flooding, and at this point the pace of forced evictions quickened.

No land for alternative settlements had been found, and it was not until April 12 that the first resettlement camp opened at Corail-Cesselesse, near the town of Croix-des-Bouquets, 6 km north of the capital. By mid-April, more than 1,000 people had been relocated to the new settlement at Corail-Cesselesse, nearly all of them from the massive camp on the golf course in the affluent suburb of Pétienville in the hills above the capital. While some residents of the new settlement welcomed the improved conditions and well-organized provision of relief supplies, others worried about their future prospects in an area far away from the work opportunities and schools found in the capital. Corail-Cesselesse will soon be able to provide accommodation to around 6,000 internally displaced people, and other new organized settlements at other sites outside Port-au-Prince may follow.

The new settlements will probably be too few and arrive too late to benefit the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced in camps across the capital. Rainfall has already washed away tents and shacks built on the hillsides and along the sides of ravines in the Bourdon Valley area of central Port-au-Prince. The rains also increase the problems of lack of sanitation and the possibility of the spread of diseases such as malaria.

UN temporarily halts forced moves

On April 22, the head of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), Edmond Mulet, announced that there would be a three-week moratorium on forced evictions, while authorities and relief agencies worked on providing more organized temporary accommodation settlements. While approving of the moratorium, critics point out that, in the three and half months since the earthquake, billions of dollars of aid for humanitarian relief had been provided by both individuals and governments. It is hard to conceive of reasons why so little has been accomplished in resolving the problem of internally displaced people.

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