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Thousands Still Homeless Almost Two Years After Earthquake

by Charles Arthur
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Twenty-two months after the earthquake that destroyed much of the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010), some 600,000 people are still homeless and living in squalid camps.

In early October, women from one displaced-people’s camp, demonstrating outside the Ministry of Social Affairs, recited a litany of problems: aging tents, shredding tarps, heat, rain, wind, colds, body aches, cholera, rats, cockroaches, raw sewage, no drinking water, no privacy, and no security.

In the context of the outpouring of generosity from across the world as ordinary people donated to emergency appeals in the aftermath of the January 2010 earthquake, and despite the hundreds of millions of dollars in reconstruction aid promised by scores of governments and international finance institutions, it is nothing less than an outrage that 600,000 people continue to live in these conditions.

That this is half the number originally left homeless gives no cause for satisfaction. Those who have left displaced-people’s camps have done so either because conditions became intolerable when nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) stopped providing relief or because they had been evicted by private or state landowners, often with the support of the police and/or hired thugs.

In some cases, the NGOs stopped providing essential services, such as drinking water, when landowners announced their intention to evict camp dwellers. In Camp Palais de l’Art, in the Bourdon valley between Port-au-Prince and the upscale district of Pétionville, residents have long been facing threats and violence from the landowners, the evangelical Church of God, in order to evict them. In June, the Church of God leaders instructed the Red Cross to stop delivering drinking water to the camp dwellers. The water shutoff occurred during a surge in the water-born cholera epidemic that first hit the capital in late 2010 (NotiCen, Nov. 18, 2010).

A Sept. 30 deadline for the camp to close was lifted under pressure from humanitarian officials, but the Church of God still wants the tent camp cleared, saying it is tired of waiting for the government to resettle the people or for the people to resettle themselves.

In one of the most notorious cases of forced eviction, in May, Wilson Jeudy, the mayor of the Port-au-Prince suburb of Delmas, used local authority security guards to close down two camps. As Sabina Dirce, a leader of a women’s organization in the Delmas 3/5 camp, told US researcher and activist Mark Schuller, "Wednesday at 6 a.m. Mayor Wilson said, 'There are going to be no people in this plaza.' He came with his agents, destroyed people’s things, crushed people’s televisions, destroyed all people’s belongings! He forced us out with rifle butts. Since Wednesday, we have been soaking under the rain. We don’t have anywhere to stay. We are just left hanging. We can’t rent a house, because housing has become expensive. We don’t know where we can go."
Elections delayed recovery efforts

Both the rehousing of displaced people and the reconstruction of government buildings and communities were set back when the bulk of planning and funding was put on hold until after the elections for a new government, held at the end of 2010 (NotiCen, Dec. 9, 2010). A new president, Michel Martelly, took office earlier this year, but reconstruction activities have only started gradually because of delays regarding the choice of a new prime minister and Cabinet approved by the parliament. In mid-October, the Senate ratified Garry Conille, a UN development specialist and aide to Bill Clinton, as prime minister.

Patrick Rouzier, the adviser spearheading a new housing initiative recently launched by President Martelly, told the Miami Herald that around 30,000 people living in six camps from 16 Port-au-Prince neighborhoods would be relocated to new homes. "We may not have solutions for everything, but we are doing concrete projects to implement that vision and we are taking decisions. We don’t have the means to rebuild a house for everyone. It’s impossible," said Rouzier.

Critics say the plan is not only too little, too late, but it fails to address the issue of rebuilding rental accommodation for the majority of people in the camps who are poor, unemployed, and have no interest in homeownership.

Reyneld Sanon is one of the coordinators of the Force for Reflection and Action on Housing (Force de Réflexions et d’Actions sur la Problématique du Logement, FRAKKA). Formed two months after the earthquake, FRAKKA is a coalition of about thirty groups, including youth, community, workers rights, popular education, and children’s rights organizations, plus organizations and leadership committees from camps.

Sanon says, "The problem of housing has always been there. If you look at the slums before Jan. 12, those weren’t houses that anyone should have been living in. As the proverb says in Haiti, 'These houses can fool the sun, but they can’t fool the rain.'"

Sanon adds, "People know that we have a state that doesn’t work for them. Generally, the state in this country just works for a small sector who are sucking the people dry, that’s in the employ of the bourgeoisie. The people don’t know they have things like the right to free schooling and to health care, and that the state has to give that to them, since they’ve never got these things. But they’ve already paid for them with their taxes and even with foreign loans, because it’s the people who are going to pay those back."

For Sanon, a real solution to the housing problem in Haiti will only come if the people take action to demand one. "We’re mobilizing people in the camps and the shantytowns to let them know that getting housing is a right. Our vision is to make the problem of housing a focal point of people’s struggle."
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