

Haiti's Excluded

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Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Ruth Derilus had seen her share of tragedy. A 33-year-old iron-willed social worker trained by Haiti's Papay Peasant Movement, she twice helped organize relief efforts when massive floods devastated the city of Gonaïves and the surrounding countryside. In September 2004 she worked with women's and youth groups after Tropical Storm Jeanne killed more than 3,000 people. Four years later, she lost her home when a second deluge, unleashed by Tropical Storm Hanna and augmented by Hurricane Ike, once again brought the city to its knees. Ruth kept on going, working to organize rice farmers whose crops had been destroyed.

But nothing would prepare her for the tribulations she would face after the earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince on January 12 of this year. Ruth was in Gonaïves, and she got a phone call within minutes. Her 20-month-old son, Chevano, who was living with her husband in the capital, had suffered a blow to his head when their family's house collapsed. The line went dead. The next morning, Ruth took a bus to Port-au-Prince and went straight to the hospital. She could not find her son. She returned home and found her mother in tears. The nearby hospital had stopped operating after the earthquake, and by the time Chevano was taken to a United Nations military hospital on the morning of January 13, it was too late. Ruth recovered her son's body ten days later. Her husband was never found.

Ruth spent two inconsolable, sleepless weeks with her family in her hometown of St. Michel de L'Atalaye. Then, on January 26, she went back to work. In part it was the desire to help her country; in part it was the need to escape her grief. She moved into a camp with thousands of other homeless people in Port-au-Prince, and signed up as an organizer for an alliance of small, progressive NGOs called the Haiti Response Coalition (haitiresponsecoalition.org). She visits two to three camps a day, helping them to get ready to receive and distribute aid.

The camps began forming hours after the earthquake, as people sought shelter far from buildings and walls. They occupied streets, empty lots, playgrounds, schools, soccer fields, plazas, parks, a car dealership, the prime minister's lawn and Haiti's only golf course. In the absence of any authority (UN peacekeepers and Haitian police were nowhere to be seen in the days after the earthquake), the survivors began organizing almost immediately, forming security brigades to protect camp residents from would-be criminals. In some camps, newly homeless doctors and nurses set up impromptu clinics for their neighbors. Camp committees dedicated their efforts to look for and receive aid from international organizations.

All this made Ruth's job easier, but she concedes that the results of her work have been disappointing. In the first days after the earthquake, the coalition's member organizations had difficulty sending aid, blocked from landing planes in Port-au-Prince by the US government, which controlled the airport and initially gave priority to troop deployments and the delivery of military equipment. But even since the transportation lines were loosened, the aid has come slowly, and Ruth has helped organize more camps than she has aid to deliver. Meanwhile, the well-heeled major relief aid agencies have often ignored camp committees and made handouts conditional on the presence of US or UN troops. (One World Food Program distribution I planned on attending was canceled at the

last minute because not enough peacekeepers could be mobilized to provide security.) Even with soldiers standing guard, the distributions often ended in melees, attracting journalists and driving away families not willing to fight for food despite their hunger.

"The fights at aid distributions are a result of the way they give aid; they have nothing to do with Haitians," says Ruth. "We are victims. We're hungry. But they need to show some respect for our dignity when they give us aid. When we have organized aid distributions, we have never had a problem. We don't need soldiers with guns. The organizations that have aid distribute it poorly, and those who can distribute the aid well don't have any."

That the large aid organizations are not reaching out to community-based organizations, much less consulting them, is nothing new in Haiti. After the 2008 floods in Gonaïves, Ruth worked with a Beltway-based nonprofit organization with a multimillion-dollar budget. She says she will never do it again.

"Of all the money they send here, only 10 percent actually makes it to the ground. The rest is spent on foreign experts, hotels, car rentals, hotel conferences."

Ruth's critiques of the current aid effort, run by foreigners who have never been to Haiti and earn five-figure monthly salaries enhanced by danger premiums, are no less withering.

"There might be a camp with 3,000 families, and they're trying to distribute 200 items. Of course there are going to be fights," says Ruth. "Some camps have four or five organizations helping them, and none of them seem to be working together. Other camps have received nothing."

On the capital's streets, frustration and resentment are increasingly tangible.

"I'm going to take to the streets to tell all the Americans they aren't doing anything useful while we are living in misery," says Marie Carinne Joseph, who has just spent a sleepless night in the rain at the Toussaint Louverture Plaza in front of the National Palace, which US troops occupied shortly after the earthquake. "I'm not into politics, but I will scream high and low. My cardboard is wet, and the sheets are wet. I'm going to raise them above my head and show the entire world so they can see them."

Some people in high places have gotten the message. John Holmes, the UN official in charge of humanitarian aid, recently warned of "the potential consequences in terms of both politics and security of large demonstrations in some sensitive places."

Holmes attributed problems in aid distribution to a lack of coordination among international organizations, in an internal e-mail leaked on February 17.

"I fear we have simply not yet injected the necessary resources in some areas in terms of capacity to implement practical programmes and deliver on the ground," he wrote.

The admonishment came in sharp contrast to the self-congratulatory comments of US Ambassador Kenneth Merten during a trip to Washington three days earlier.

"In terms of humanitarian aid delivery...frankly, it's working really well," Merten told journalists. "And I believe that this will be something that people will be able to look back on in the future as a model for how we've been able to sort ourselves out as donors on the ground and responding to an earthquake."

US officials have already drafted long-term plans for Haiti behind closed doors. According to the Miami Herald, the Obama administration is pushing a plan that would create a Haitian Development Authority to manage foreign assistance for the next ten years. Canada has reportedly proposed that the World Bank run a trust fund, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced his country's aid

scheme on February 17 after flying onto the grounds of the collapsed National Palace, the blasts of wind from his helicopter knocking off tarpaulin roofs in the adjacent tent city. The Haitian government is drafting its own plan to remake the country before a donor conference on March 31. And the Haitian elite have published a 173-page "Strategic Plan for National Salvation," whose editorial committee was led by Rudolph Boulou, a wealthy politician who was booted out of the Haitian Senate two years ago after documents surfaced proving he was a US citizen.

All the official plans ostensibly call for decentralization and investment in agriculture and tourism, aiming to encourage the nearly 600,000 displaced people who have fled the capital for the countryside to stay there. But so far there is no sign that either the Haitian government or its international backers are interested in bucking the neoliberal consensus, which for three decades has held that instead of producing their own food, peasants should migrate to the city to work in assembly plants.

On the contrary, the UN supports an economic recovery plan, endorsed by Bill Clinton and set in motion before the earthquake, centered in large part on bolstering the maquiladora industry. Calls for its implementation by international actors and members of the Haitian elite who run the plants have grown louder since the earthquake. Meanwhile, of the \$575 million UN appeal for aid issued shortly after the earthquake, only 4 percent, or \$23 million, was earmarked to help Haitian farmers obtain seeds and fertilizer (farmers have been feeding seeds intended for next season's crops to family members who have fled the capital). A month later, Food and Agriculture Organization chief Jacques Diouf complained that only 8 percent of this target had been met. On February 25 a UN report confirmed that the agriculture sector still had not received the funds. In the countryside, there is no evidence of any humanitarian aid, much less for agriculture.

In the desolate Anse Rouge salt flats nearly 125 miles north of Port-au-Prince, Louise Bonne Raymond sleeps with her daughter and other family members on the floor of the thatched patio of her cousin's house. Before the earthquake, nine people lived in the house. Now there are twenty-five.

"We live day to day here," says Louise Bonne, who is 30 and has spent her entire life in the capital. "We get up, and if we have food, we eat. If not, we have no choice. We have nothing and the people who live here don't either, because this is the countryside. There are no crops and no rice in reserve that they could give you either."

The house her father built in downtown Port-au-Prince collapsed, burying the clothes and cosmetics she sold to make a living. Louise Bonne and her daughter slept the first night in the street, and the next day found a cousin with a truck who took them and other family members to the salt flats.

She had been there only twice in the past twelve years. The only available job is harvesting salt—low-paying, unreliable and backbreaking work. The nearest secondary school is two hours away, and nonpotable water is available for sale twice a week. The family buys enough water to fill two sixty-gallon drums, and rations its use. Food is equally scarce—prices of imported staples like rice and beans shot up after the earthquake. Louise Bonne and her cousins braid one another's hair and sing dirges to pass the time. "Oh Lord, you don't see this feeling of danger. If you see me crying, it's the problems I've got," goes one song.

Despite the flood of displaced people here since the earthquake, community leaders in Anse Rouge told me that no humanitarian aid has reached there. But Louise Bonne does not plan on returning to Port-au-Prince. There is nothing left for her there, she says, and she would prefer to eke out an existence in the countryside than face another earthquake in the capital.

"Giving food aid from day to day is fine, but they should help us develop our natural resources for the long term," she says. "That way, we can respond to our needs without having to depend on someone else to give us rice, beans and the other daily necessities."

It is a demand repeated across Haiti, before and after the earthquake. Thirty years ago Haitians produced most of the food they consumed, surviving on a diverse diet that included homegrown staples such as manioc, breadfruit, yams, sweet potatoes, plantains, millet, corn and rice. Rice imports were extremely limited. It was grown in the fertile Artibonite Valley and was eaten as a special meal on Sundays or special occasions. Beginning in 1986, a military junta backed by Washington began flooding the market with cheap imported rice subsidized by the US government. The economic liberalization was overseen by Leslie Delatour, a "Chicago Boy" economist whose widow, Elisabeth Débrosse Delatour, later became an economic adviser to current President René Préval, and is now his wife.

A quarter-century later, millions of families live in precarious slums, farmers are incapable of feeding the population and the country is heavily dependent on imported food, above all US-grown rice (of which Haiti is now the fourth-largest importer). The devastating consequences of this dependence became impossible to ignore in April 2008, when hundreds of thousands of Haitians protested rising prices of imported food, paralyzing the country with roadblocks and forcing the ouster of the prime minister. Préval lowered the price of imported rice, and his foreign backers began paying lip service to supporting national production. But as usual, little was done to support Haitian farmers.

The earthquake has only exacerbated Haiti's dependence on US imports and foreign aid. White rice from the United States has been the keystone of the humanitarian aid response. But it has provoked angst from Artibonite rice farmers, who complain of the absence of credit, antiquated tools, broken irrigation systems, prohibitively high prices for fertilizer and, above all, subsidized "Miami rice" that undercuts their sales.

"It hits us hard," says Rosalvo Louverture, standing in his rice paddy less than three hours north of Port-au-Prince. "It's foreign aid that is helping the people in Port-au-Prince. But we could respond to their needs. We should be feeding them."

International aid groups compare notes and discuss strategies for distributing aid at "cluster meetings," from which ordinary Haitians are in effect banned. "Poor Haitians are not only not present at these meetings; they are made to feel unwelcome," a development consultant from a prominent Haitian family told me. It is not only the poor who have been shut out of the decision-making process. A friend of mine, a Haitian government official who was sent to a food cluster meeting, was barred from entering because she did not have a passport.

Discrimination against Haitians in their own country seems more prevalent than ever since the earthquake. US Coast Guard officials barred my Haitian cameraman from entering the airport, where military press attachés were giving interviews, even though he had a UN-issued press credential. When I asked if he should return with a passport, they said they would be even less inclined to let him enter out of concern that he would somehow hop aboard a US-bound plane. Ruth Derilus has yet to visit a cluster meeting. But she hopes to soon. She recently joined a group of Haitian community leaders who are determined to force the international aid agencies to listen to their demands.

"We're going to fight against the way in which they are giving aid," she says. "These meetings of the big foreigners are the ones that will decide our future. We can't be afraid of what they think of us. We need to speak when we're not in agreement. We have to put pressure on them."

Ruth says she is hopeful that the earthquake will open the doors for real change.

"The positive aspect of the earthquake is that for the first time, all the people who had migrated to Port-au-Prince are returning to the countryside," she says. "Port-au-Prince was not built for this many people, and that's why there were so many victims from the earthquake. Port-au-Prince needs help, but now is the time to support Haitian farmers so we can produce our own food." Another Haiti is possible, if there is enough will, capacity and solidarity."

Those are three big ifs, and Ruth readily concedes that her expectations of reversing the current aid juggernaut are muted. In the meantime, she says, she will keep fighting, organizing displaced people by day, and keeping her sorrow at bay by night.

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P.S.

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