

Haiti: Earthquake victims attacked

Wednesday 4 August 2010, by [DOUCET Isabeau](#) (Date first published: 1 August 2010).

On July 12, six months to the day after January's earthquake, the Haitian government held a ceremony behind the crumbled National Palace.

Before assembled dignitaries from embassies, NGOs, and Haiti's elite, President Rene Preval and Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive draped medals of honor on prominent figures ranging from CNN celebrity journalist Anderson Cooper and Hollywood actor Sean Penn to retired Colonel Himmler Rebu and retired General Herard Abraham, officers who have enforced dictatorships and participated in coups over the past 30 years.

Meanwhile, the hungry, homeless residents of a post-quake spontaneous settlement in Cite Soleil fretted about whether they would spend another sleepless night and where.

Camp Immaculee was a cluster of precariously erected tarps and lopsided sleeping cubicles made up of rotting bed sheets and sodden cardboard box mattresses in a community park.

It had been home to about 200 internally displaced people since January 12. But on July 12, after a month of harassment and by unidentified armed men, the camp's residents abandoned their pitiful settlement to set up an equally precarious camp up the road.

Former US president Bill Clinton — now UN special envoy to Haiti and co-chair with Bellerive of the Interim Commission to Reconstruct Haiti (CIRH) — gave the keynote speech at the Palace event.

"We want Haiti to have a strong middle class, and we want poor people to own more property and believe they can work themselves into the middle class", he said. But the displaced people of Camp Immaculee were finding it impossible to find a place to squat, much less own.

The traumatic uprooting of Camp Immaculee is being reproduced all around Port-au-Prince. Nonetheless, Clinton stood four-square behind Preval and Bellerive, whom large demonstrations in recent months have accused of providing weak leadership at best or, worse, becoming a corrupt dictatorship.

"Neither the president or the prime minister has even one time refused any request to make all donations of public and private money completely transparent on the internet and have performance audits done to make sure the work was accomplished", Clinton asserted.

However, the Haitian relief and reconstruction efforts have proceeded with a "shocking lack of transparency", according to a report published that day by the Disaster Accountability Project, an investigative auditing organisation founded after Hurricane Katrina.

The group conducted a five-month investigation to determine whether the non-profit groups and NGOs that solicited donations for Haitian disaster relief had produced comprehensive and publicly accessible situation reports on their activities.

Of 197 organisations, only six have provided reports itemising their activities.

“The vast majority, 128, did not have factual situation reports available on their websites,” the report found, “relying instead upon anecdotal descriptions of activities or emotional appeals.”

Even Clinton urged NGOs to make evidence of their work more available, complaining later that he couldn't find evidence of it online. The residents of Camp Immaculee claim they have yet to receive any aid whatsoever.

Many NGOs refuse to enter Cite Soleil, unlike Medecins Sans Frontieres, which largely runs the main hospital there.

An architect working for the Clinton Foundation and the Haitian government to deal with reconstruction and the housing crisis claims his insurance bars him from even entering Cite Soleil.

The vanishing camps reveal a larger problem of land rights. Between Haitian property and inheritance law, international human rights law, and the April 15 State of Emergency law, there is widespread legal confusion which contributes to a lack of political will to ensure the basic human rights of internally displaced people.

Mere legal technicalities become insurmountable obstacles. Might becomes the only right, where displaced people end up either pleading with or fleeing from vigilante landowners.

Camp Immaculee's numbers dwindled to 20 after weeks of frequent night-time raids by about a dozen masked men who stormed through the encampment, throwing rocks and wielding machetes, broken glass bottles and pistols.

They terrorised and browbeat families, many with orphaned and maimed children, into moving elsewhere. Four women reported being molested. Many relocated to sleep unsheltered on the asphalt of nearby cul-de-sacs.

The International Organisation on Migration (IOM), a UN-affiliated intergovernmental agency that works on managing internally displaced people (IDP), first misidentified the problem, blaming the violence on the victims.

The IOM identified the “problem” as the “need of [Cite Soleil's] population and the PNH [Haitian National Police] to expel IDPs of Camp Imaculee who are believed to have attacked a PNH patrol.”

Then the IOM told camp residents it could not directly help with security and did not work weekends. On July 13, the IOM published a report stating that Camp Immaculee had moved, implying they had facilitated the move. “The IOM is a complete liar,” said one of the camp residents, a victim of IOM neglect. “I don't trust them for anything.”

Members of International Action Ties (IAT), an independent human rights organisation focused on forced camp evictions, have been closely monitoring the camp since late June. They received multiple night-time phone calls while the camp was under attack.

Both the monitoring team and camp members repeatedly called hotline numbers (113 and 114) for the UN Mission to Stabilise Haiti (Minustah) as well as personal contact numbers for Minustah officers and the police.

The IAT's calls never succeeded in getting protection for the camp, but were lost in a maze of bureaucracy, deferred responsibility, and ineptitude. Meanwhile, camp residents say their cell-phones were stolen by the attackers after they tried to call the hotlines.

The IAT went to the Minustah base with a committee representing the camp. The UN police told the delegation that they don't patrol after 10pm. The police claimed they had no staff to station anyone near the camp at night.

Both Minustah and the police have bases two blocks away from where the camp was. Minustah officials also said they are unable to enter the camp unless they directly witnessed an attack.

After attacks on three consecutive nights in early July, IAT members spent a night in the camp to document the situation and found that no Minustah or police patrols passed between 1am and 5am, the hours in which the attackers usually came. Minustah claimed they would try to increase patrols but said it wouldn't prevent attacks.

"Every means of protections that we have pursued or been informed of through protection cluster meetings with Minustah, UN police, and the PNH were not sufficient to prevent the attacks that were happening on a nightly basis", said the IAT's Mark Snyder.

Distraught and at an impasse, remaining camp residents finally fled and relocated, only to be attacked at their new site.

This is just one recent and well-documented case of a wider systematic failure on the part of the humanitarian relief and reconstruction complex to protect the basic human rights of internally displaced people.

In the face of this dramatically deteriorating situation, Clinton continued to be disingenuously upbeat and unrealistic about the options available to the average Haitian.

He said: "To all the Haitians who are not on this Commission [the CIRH], you should feel free to talk to the Haitian members and to the rest of us. This should be an exciting period for this country.

"We're going to give you the first time in history when all your children are going to school. If you choose, we can give Haiti the first time in your history when you'll be able to provide all your own energy; and you don't have to send the money overseas.

"If you choose, you can have the first financial system with rapidly growing private businesses."

The real beneficiaries are the businesses and NGOs using Haiti's humanitarian crisis as a cash cow. People in the camps know that they are victims of an earthquake, but also increasingly suspect they are victims of a massive, internationally sanctioned fraud.

"These are choices; I want you to enjoy this process", Clinton added. "But all of you have to feel you own a part of it."

It is strange to speak of choices, ownership and enjoying a process to people who have nothing, whose choices are all dead-ends, and who are completely alienated from the process that is deciding their future.

After never seeing post-earthquake aid, protection against violent aggressors, or help relocating their camp, despite countless phone calls, meetings and reports by outside observers, Camp Immaculee residents, like most Haitians, have no confidence in the prospects of free and fair elections, portending turbulent times ahead.

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P.S.

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