

Haiti: Continuing Unrest Hampers Relief Efforts

By Ryan Gallant
Reporter

A recent tropical storm that hit Haiti has rocked the small island nation to its core, disturbing the delicate peace that has been precariously balanced since President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forced from power earlier this year.

Tropical storm Jeanne, which later regained strength as a hurricane and made land-fall in South Florida, hit Haiti on September 17th, dumping 25 centimetres of rain and wreaking havoc for over 30 hours on the island, leaving millions in neighbouring Dominican Republic homeless. The after-effects of the storm proved much more devastating, however. The island, which is particularly vulnerable as it is 98% deforested, was also hit with extensive flooding earlier this year, killing hundreds in both Haiti and the Dominican Republic. This lack of forested area also contributed to the destruction as river banks swelled and overflowed into valleys. Mudslides and flooding resulting from the storm destroyed entire villages.

In Gonaïves alone, a city of about 250,000 people, 2,826 were reported dead or missing after a mudslide swept through the city. The Secretary of State for the Environment set the death toll at 3,006 and as rescue workers reached remote areas, that toll was expected to rise substantially. Over 150 were reported dead by other nations across the region.

The acts of insurgents and supporters of the Aristide administration, which fell during civil unrest in February, further hindered relief efforts following the storm. Several people were executed by decapitation, including three police officers, in apparent imitation of Iraqi insurgents. At least 19 people have been killed in the violence, seriously delaying relief workers and paralyzing the movement of supplies into storm-affected regions. Since Jeanne, Aristide supporters have taken control of a Bel Air slum over-looking the Presidential Palace in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital. UN troops

already stationed in the city, pursuant to events in February and March, along with Haitian government police, performed a raid of Bel Air last week, detaining 500 residents for questioning, but failing to recover any firearms. Renan Etienne, Haiti's western police director, was reported as saying to the Associated Press that "They were all bandits...they had been firing at police." He was unable to explain why they were unable to find any weapons.

It is questionable whether the Brazilian-led UN contingent of 3,000 and the ill-equipped Haitian police force of 3,000 could maintain control during civil unrest and insurgency in the country of 8 million, especially while under disaster-recovery conditions. Already, 750 peacekeepers have been committed to aiding those in Gonaïves, a city that has been struggling to recover since February when a street gang torched buildings, released criminals from jail and forced police to flee. Many were killed in riots and attacks after Aristide was forced to leave on February 29th.

Now, workers from the UN and Red Cross are struggling to reach, support and feed an estimated 100,000 residents who have not yet been able to reach UN food centres, either because of inaccessibility, or because they are too sick or weak. Much of the food is stolen and convoys are looted before they can reach their destinations. Street gangs rob many of their rations. "This threatens to paralyze all the humanitarian efforts we have in Gonaïves," said Anne Poulson of the UN World Food Program. "No one can afford to leave people in Gonaïves without food for even a day or two." Ms. Poulson commented that 135 containers with 2,200 tonnes of food were stuck in port, where workers fled after

being scared off by the violence.



The violence is hard to control in Port-au-Prince

Source: BBC News | Americas

As a result of the situation, the Red Cross extended a plea for \$4 million for relief efforts in Haiti. Canada has sent a military plane to Haiti, carrying 14 tonnes of relief supplies, including blankets and plastic tarps for shelter.

It remains unclear how much the after-effects of Jeanne will continue to affect peace and infra-

structure in Haiti. The 3,000 UN peacekeepers is less than half the number that was originally pledged to the country, and the lack of protection for relief efforts is indicative of how problematic this could prove to be. The next major issue will be cleaning up the debris and rebuilding houses and buildings that were destroyed. A daunting task in the best of situations, Haiti is presented with many obstacles. Poverty ravages the people of the small republic and it is widely considered to be the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. As insurgency continues, the nation is perched precariously close to all-out war, and this can only hinder efforts to rebuild infrastructure.

Bodies have been buried in mass graves in attempts to offset disease and infection that often accompanies similar situations. Fresh water is a much sought-after resource as debris and dead bodies of people and animals fill the rivers and rescinding waters.

On the individual level, citizens are doing their best to come to terms with the disaster, salvaging anything they can from their homes and attempting to begin the colossal chore of rebuilding lives and of restoring some degree of normalcy.



Cleaning up in Gonaïves, Haiti. (CBC Photo/Stephen Puddicombe)

Source: CBC News