



All and everything is recycled to construct shelter.

Photo by Phillip Wearne, HSG.

Biggest humanitarian challenge since Second World War

No room at the inn

You see it first and best from the air. Translucent, deep blue specks, as yet unfaded by the remorseless sun, they stand out against the turquoise seawater and the beige of the dry landscape.

As the aircraft descends, homing in on the Port-au-Prince runway, the specks become steadily larger, and their various shapes – squares the size of garden huts, triangles, like tents – become clear. These are the UN-issued tarpaulins: the emergency shelter from sun and rain that are the standard measure of the scale of a natural disaster. Here they are everywhere yet

everyone needs another and many have none.

With an estimated 1.3 million homeless, 400,000 injured and the death toll still oscillating between 230,000 and 305,000, Haiti's January 12th earthquake is the biggest natural disaster anywhere this century, eclipsing even the Asian tsunami five years ago.

And everyone, from the largest, best-funded UN agency to the smallest private relief group, believes that the legacy of this earthquake presents the greatest humanitarian challenge since the end of World War II.

Unlike the 2004 Boxing Day

tsunami which hit limited areas of mostly medium-income states, January's earthquake in Haiti hit the capital city of one country – the poorest in the Americas.

In doing so, it tore the heart out of this highly centralised state – home to more than 3 million people – and took with it whatever limited capacity its government had to respond. The National Palace and almost every ministry collapsed. Some 18% of the country's civil servants were killed.

Camping in the Ruins

The consequences of all that are visible everywhere. The tropical

climate, gross overcrowding, and the ubiquitous presence of the *ti-machann* street sellers, means that a large part of life in Haiti's capital has always been lived on the street. Now, for most, there is nowhere but the street.

Tents are everywhere. Any and every open space seems to have been filled. Deluxe homes now are the large, family tents of Shelterbox or the Red Cross – designed for long-term emergency shelter. Mid-range residences are the huge assortment of smaller, bright-coloured “fun” tents – designed for a weekend's summer camping. Little of what is on view **page 2** ►

from page 1 will be a match for Haiti's rains – the drenching tropical downpours that fuel the growing season from May to September – that are now upon us. Much less the hurricane season which is not far behind.

But those with a tent – and the space to pitch it – are the lucky ones. Far more are making do with tarpaulins, a length of plastic sheeting or anything salvaged from the ruins: pieces of corrugated iron, jagged bits of plywood, even the remains of advertising hoardings.

Camps range in size from the 70,000 plus people clinging to the steep slopes of the Petionville Country Club with its “Members Only” signs to the family group street encampments in places like lower Delmas.

At the bottom of the displaced people pile are those with shelters made of bedsheets, counterpanes, towels and flattened cardboard boxes, all of which billow outwards like sails in the slightest breath of wind.

The Bottom of the Pile

The Sylvie family fall into this category. As we approach Jean-Marie Vincent Park on the airport road, ten-year old Wilson Sylvie insists on becoming our “guide.” Either side of the wide, crazy-paved path dissecting it, every square foot of this park is now a home. Here there are no tents – indeed there are few tarpaulins.

Stalls along the path in front of the homes abutting the path – the prime location here – sell anything they can. Reclaimed nails in bags of five, a couple of brass door handles; cooked rice and beans by the serving spoonful; small bags of the charcoal with which Haitians cook; the mangoes and the finger bananas that are the envy of the world in ones and twos.

Residents are collecting rubble – the one thing Haiti is not short of now – in buckets, bowls and bags from piles dumped by battered pick-ups. Whatever its size or composition it makes excellent hardcore for the mud floors of huts or their surrounding paths.

Wilson dives into a barely visible gap – the one-foot wide “alley” between two shacks. A muddy path winds around six, seven, eight huts, the depth of this camp. “This is my house,” he says almost proudly, introducing his mother sitting outside on a wooden chair that has lost its back. She smiles and shows us in through the bed-cover that is the door.

The space is about 9-foot square, a wood frame sunk into the mud floor covered with a patchwork of materials – an

opened rice sack on one wall, a sheet on another. It is stiflingly hot under the plastic sheet roof which filters sunlight with a grey-blue hue. Ten people sleep here. How?

Wilson pulls down various pieces of odd-shaped plywood and cardboard leaning against the side walls and shows us how they position them on the damp earth floor to bed down for the night. This is as basic as it gets even here in Haiti, even post-earthquake.

Water, Toilets and Rain

There is water here as in most major encampments – stored in emergency bladders, filled by water tankers, accessed by standpipes. But there are no toilets. Thirty feet behind the Wilson family home, ten men are digging two rows of latrines as part of the cash-for-work schemes now being run by the Haitian government and relief agencies.

These toilets are a standard pit-

latrine design – only possible where the camps are on soft ground. Often they are complimented by shower/wash cubicles – wood frames covered with coloured plastic sheeting. Elsewhere, where camps are on concrete or asphalt, there are portable chemical toilets, or even toilet cubicles cut into shipping containers. But almost all camps could use more sanitation and all too many on the streets in the smaller infor-

Organizing in the camps: KOFATIV struggles on



KOFATIV headquarters – a large hexagonal tent off the

‘Is this really ha

It’s a world turned upside down – where gravity, normality seems suspended. “The earth is still shaking in your head – it’s as if you’re dizzy and can’t stand up or focus.”

On the morning of January 12, KOFATIV was one of the country’s leading women’s grassroots organisations. It had its own offices at 36 Rue St. Anne, in downtown Port-au-Prince, more than 3000 members, a school and clinic – all just a stone’s throw from the National Palace.

Today, KOFATIV’s office is a large hexagonal tent, protected by two tarpaulins: one covering the tent, the other forming an awning which serves as a meeting place, kitchen, sitting room and washroom. With just inches between hundreds of tents, shacks and tarpaulins in one of the small public parks that bisect the

Champs de Mars, all just yards from the rubble that was the Presidential Palace, this has to be one of the most densely populated locations on earth.

“Twenty people sleep here, eight in the tent, 12 under the awning,” says Malaya Villard Apolon, KOFATIV Co-ordinator, glancing around what must be no more than an 18 foot square space. “When it rains at night those sleeping out here have to stand up,” she says, toeing the earth floor where we perch on the remains of assorted chairs salvaged from the debris, all borrowed from various neighbouring tents.

KOFATIV are still counting their dead, who now number just short of 150. “We lost eight members just in and around the office,” says Marie Eramithe Delva, who ran KOFATIV’s

mal camps have no sanitation at all.

As the rains begin, inadequate sanitation is one element of a triple, inter-linked threat to those who have no home left. Firstly, there is the risk of water-borne disease as bacteria are transported from shack to shack in the run-off water that surges through the alleys during a downpour. Secondly, there is the hugely heightened threat of the traditional rainy season epidemics, particularly malaria and

dengue fever, in the cramped, fetid conditions. Thirdly, there is the inadequacy of the shelter itself. It is clear that some family shelters, those in ravines and on steep slopes, will simply not survive the first real rainy season challenge. They will be swept away.

The relief agencies now claim they are 80% of the way to their stated target of two tarpaulins per family for the 1.3 million homeless. But as distribution races the

rains, it has become clear that the government's homeless figure was an underestimate of at least 200,000. Nearly 500,000 individuals, at least 100,000 families, were still waiting for any waterproof covering handout as of mid-April.

It is equally clear that thousands of displaced people will have to move before the heaviest rains begin.

But move where? And how?

Some are already facing removal against their will, at times with no alternative accommodation provided.

Even though as many as 500,000 of the city's residents have "reverse migrated" back to the provinces, every available piece of ground in Port-au-Prince – public, private, indeterminate – is squatted. In Port-au-Prince more than ever before, there really is no room at the inn. ■



Champs de Mars situated near the rubble of the National Palace.

Photo by Harvey Hook.

happening to us?'

programmes and was on her way home when the 7.0 Richter scale quake struck at 4.53 pm.

As of this writing, the list of members unaccounted for numbers 332. Making any form of contact is a struggle under these conditions. "Many don't know where we are, others, about 1500 we think, have left to go to family or relatives in the countryside, where we can do even less for them," says Eramithe. "And some are still under the rubble....."

KOFAVIV (Commission of Women Victims for Victims) is primarily an anti-violence group where women, many victims of sexual or domestic abuse, or *restaveks*, unpaid domestic servants, mostly girls, come together to campaign for change, for rights, for justice. But like so many popular organisations in Haiti, where there is almost no state social provision, KO-

FAVIV developed to offer remedial services that grappled with the causes of the symptoms they dealt with. Hence their divergence into health care, education, and social support.

Today, when the need has never been greater, their resources and capacity have never been less. Food, health care, shelter, clothes and basic security are now required by everyone – not just the most vulnerable. Yet faced with this need, KOFAVIV has no office, no files, no computers, no furniture; not to mention no budget to cope with what are often life and death necessities.

"If I stop to think, I cannot believe this is real, that this is happening to us, so its best to keep working, just doing what we can," says Eramithe. "Our main task now is information to members, informing them of their rights as to

what food, shelter and security they should expect and trying to enforce those rights."

The most immediate problem, as elsewhere, is sanitation; the most immediate threat the rains.

"There's a complete lack of dignity, privacy here especially for woman. You can't wash or shower anywhere," complains Malaya. "When it rains we're living in a refuse dump – mud, rubbish, water, everything. Everywhere."

Sexual violence has been another big problem. "There is no security for anyone sleeping here in the street. The prisoners all escaped from the jail down the road and the police do absolutely nothing," says Eramithe. KOFAVIV has had scores of women come to them testifying to attacks, rapes and even murders, sometimes all three in one incident.

Such work may even have made the organisation a target itself. On March 2, Merline, Eramithe's 17-year old daughter was attacked on the Champs de Mars. Merline managed to get away but sometime later her assailant turned up at their tent armed, along with three others. "They claimed I had stolen a watch and went into the tent, ransacking everything, looking for a watch they knew I did not have," says Merline.

Beverly Bell, a Kreyol-speaking grassroots activist and long-time partner of KOFAVIV says she is astonished at what the group continues to achieve. "Every time I wend my way through the camp to get to the tarp that forms their headquarters, I find some variant of this: they have just taken one of their members to the hospital for emergency treatment; they are discussing how to intervene in the case of a young woman who is being beaten by her mate; they are sitting with a 10-year old boy who has just become an orphan and is spitting up blood; they are composing the "Know Your Rights" sheet they are going to print and distribute to women throughout the camp."

All this, Beverly points out, in the face of deep personal and collective trauma. "These women have lost children, colleagues, homes. They have nowhere to cook or pee; they sleep on the dirt – or not.... There is violence all around them and they are the sole resource for so many. It's amazing." ■

If you can help KOFAVIV, please send a cheque made payable to "Haiti Support Group" to HSG, 49 Stanger Road, London SE25 5LD. Please write "KOFAVIV" on the back of the cheque and add your email address. We will then acknowledge receipt.

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The Haiti Support Group – supporting Haitians to build a better future



Photos by Harvey Hook.

In 1992 a small group of UK-based friends formed the Haiti Support Group (HSG) in response to a coup d'etat against the elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. HSG built contacts with grassroots organisations in Haiti, brought exiled Haitian leaders to the UK, linked them with supportive organisations in Europe and campaigned on key development issues.

Through this work our mission evolved into one simple aim: to amplify the voices of the poor majority of Haitians in the debate about how to make their country -- one of the poorest in the world -- a fairer society. We enjoyed some success and our efforts motivated many in the UK to get involved in practical political support for civil society organisations in Haiti.

The earthquake of 12 January 2010 has, as the HSG's Phillip Wearne has described in this issue, posed an overwhelming challenge to our central mission. The women's groups, peasant co-operatives and workers unions we have been supporting are among those hardest hit by the disaster, both personally and politically. New organisations and leaders are springing up in the camps that dot Port-au-Prince: they urgently need to be heard. Yet without contacts, infrastructure and funds, the government of Haiti and the inter-governmental bodies that determine much of Haiti's development agenda find it even easier than before to ignore both old and new grassroots organisations.

The HSG's role is thus more vital than ever. We are already

In the next issue: analysis of the aid effort, more on the needs and views of those in the camps (some already being forcibly moved to new sites) and the launch of our first post-earthquake campaign.

campaigning on issues raised with us by Haitians, such as the human rights of the internally-displaced and the development agenda for Haiti after the UN summit of 31 March. Their priorities are ours. They include greater emphasis on sustainable subsistence agriculture towards food sovereignty, environmental protection, fair pay and conditions on plantations and in factories and campaigns for decentralisation and participatory democracy.

To do any and all of this we need your help. Please use the form below to join the Haiti Support Group. You will receive this Haiti Briefing four times a year, regular email updates and what we think you will find the greatest satisfaction of all: the chance to join the campaign to change Haiti.

YES! I want to help the Haiti Support Group (HSG) continue its work after the devastating earthquake of 12 January 2010.

I will receive four issues of the *Haiti Briefing* newsletter, be subscribed to an email news service, have access to the HSG website and receive information on events and campaigns.

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