

Delatour – leader of the reconstruction - sees hope, outlines needs as city struggles for new life

Written by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (NNPA) - A traffic jam in the streets of Downtown Port-au-Prince makes it barely impossible to navigate the van from block to block. People walk along the edges of the streets, seemingly defying the moving vehicles only inches away.

Some sit on chairs or upside down buckets on the sidewalk, selling goods or cooking in large pots.

Others - in sweltering 90-degree temperatures - balance large baskets and bundles on their heads with great poise. For an American in Haiti for the first time, it's momentarily difficult to tell what's normal and what is due to the devastating earthquake that only occurred a month earlier.

But, then it's made starkly clear at the sight of a heap of rubble. What was once a building is now a mountain of cinder blocks and metal. In some areas a shifting breeze brings the sudden whiff of a putrid odor, a reminder of mass graves holding thousands of bodies not far outside the city.

A young woman walks topless and exposed in the streets, turning heads and exacerbating the confusion. The Haitian driver explains that mental health hospitals are among those destroyed by the earthquake; therefore many patients, like her, who were formerly confined are walking around without care or medication. He further explains that the traffic jam and nearly impossible parking is largely due to the destruction of parking decks that existed before the earthquake.

On the other side of the city the day before, a basketball game between young men in the streets appeared like any major city in the U. S. But, that was only if you chose to ignore the sea of tents in the background where their families now live. Women cook in open air and people bathe with little privacy; doing the best they can to resume lives that will never be the same.

Considering all that's happened, the hustle and bustle in the Capitol City of Haiti is a good sign. It is a sign of a city, still ravaged and mangled, still reeling from the pain of massive death; yet struggling to return to life. The people of Port-au-Prince are reaching out for all the help it can get – from the U. S. and around the world. This is not only because of the earthquake, but because the rainy season that is about to start could cause even more death and destruction.

“We’re asking the international community to continue to finance all of the projects that are in the pipeline of the program of development,” said Haiti’s Minister of Tourism Patrick Delatour, a graduate of Howard University in Washington, D.C. Even his life is a dichotomy as he sits at the conference table, speaking passionately to a group of nine African American media representatives as President Rene Preval’s point man for reconstruction. He envisions the future of Haiti through eyes that still grieve the loss of both of his own parents, killed in the January 12 earthquake.

Speaking for Preval, who was unable to keep an appointment with the delegation, Delatour makes it clear that money allocated for pre-earthquake development in Haiti should not be reallocated for earthquake-related needs.

“[Preval] does not want to use the humanitarian needs of that disaster as an excuse to divert

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money that happens to be in the pipeline and redirected toward Port-au-Prince ," he said.

The severely underdeveloped infrastructure of Haiti, the financially poorest nation in the Americas , was already due millions of dollars in international relief for development of roads, hospitals and food. "All of those programs must continue while we are looking for fresh money [for the Earthquake relief]", said Delatour.

The earthquake relief need is great. It amounts to at least \$1 billion for demolition alone; plus \$4 billion for reconstruction, he said.

Conditions observed during the African-American delegation's tour of Port-au-Prince underscored the depth of needs outlined by Delatour. The dome of the Presidential Palace is toppled eerily forward. Churches are demolished, including the once majestic Catholic Cathedral; hospitals, health centers and schools are either wiped out or too dangerous to re-inhabit.

At least 400,000 people, about a third of the population of Port-au-Prince, have already left the city for other provinces. Thousands are in tents, but hundreds of thousands are still in need of shelter as the rainy season approaches.

Delatour was the highest ranking among a string of presenters who briefed the delegation of working journalists during the whirlwind tour February 9-12.

The group included Herb Boyd and Eddie Harris, Free Speech Television; Daniel Berdiel, XM/SIRIUS Satellite Radio; Joe Madison, Black Eagle, Host, Madison and Company, XM/SIRIUS/WOL; Sharon Madison, also Madison and Company; Hazel Trice Edney, Editor-in-Chief, NNPA News Service; Richard Muhammad, editor-in-chief, Final Call Newspaper; Omarosa Stallworth, Haiti Support Project, Celebrity Ambassador; and Ron Daniels, president and CEO of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century and founder of its Haiti Support Project.

Now that food, water and medical help is being provided, the most pressing need is shelter from the coming rains, Delatour said: "Fortunately, for us, God is on our Side because the rainy season has not started yet."

He hopes for mass deliveries of tarps, an open but water-proof tent-like shelter which he believes is best.

Though the weather is warm year-round, starting in March is a three-month rainy season during which it pours daily. Floorless tents and coverings without walls are a major concern of Ron Daniels, who led the delegation on the fact-finding mission to Haiti.

"I am so fearful of what may happen if somehow more stable structures or temporary housing is put in place before the rainy season begins," Daniels said. "Just the drainage and the lack of sanitation and what that water is going to mean when it starts carrying all of those contaminants and fluids will just be a disaster on top of a disaster," he said.

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Daniels, who has long been an activist for Haiti, says he is amazed that the country appears to be stabilizing although the need for help is consistent and growing. But, the resilience of Haiti - with a proud history as the first Black-led republic in the world after gaining independence as part of a successful slave rebellion in 1804 - is no surprise to anyone.

Daniels is hoping that empathetic African-Americans will continue to reach out in masses. "I am not here to organize the Haitian community. The Haitian community can organize itself. For the last 15 years, my task has been to bring the African American and other people of African descent to the table to partner with Haitian-Americans and we take that seriously. We obviously want you to take that seriously because we want to bring the vast resources of the African American community to the table."