Haiti 'still in crisis' 10 years after earthquake

January 14 2020, by Debora Van Brenk

An aerial view of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, shows the proximity of homes, many damaged in a major earthquake and subsequent aftershocks. Several U.S. and international military and non-governmental agencies are conducting humanitarian and disaster relief operations as part of Operation Unified Response after a 7.0-magnitude earthquake caused severe damage in and around Port-au-Prince, Haiti Jan. 12. Credit: U.S. Navy // Special to Western News

When a 7.0 earthquake reduced Haiti to rubble, sparking one of the biggest international aid efforts in history, some experts predicted it would take the country a decade to get back to its feet.

Far from recovering since Jan. 12, 2010, Haiti today faces more dire circumstances than ever, says a Western expert.

There's little gas or electricity; schools and hospitals are closed; more than a million Haitians remain displaced; the economy has tanked; inflation has soared; there's been no parliamentary government for almost a year; and daily mass protests call for world leaders' attention.

"Everyone I know in Haiti says it's the worst it's ever been. The earthquake isn't even a touchpoint now for them of how bad it's been," said Anthropology professor Greg Beckett, author of There Is No More Haiti: Between Life and Death in Port-au-Prince.

With its epicenter in Leogane, approximately 25 km west of the capital Port-au-Prince, the initial 7.0 earthquake struck at 2:53 local time. By Jan. 24, more than 50 aftershocks measuring 4.5 or greater were recorded.

The earthquake drew the sympathies and concerted efforts of an international community stunned by reports of the devastation. As many as 300,000 people were killed; three times that number were displaced. Entire cities collapsed into themselves and critical infrastructure vanished to cement dust.

Scenes of the catastrophe mobilized aid from across the globe, including at Western, where the University of Western Ontario Staff Association (UWOFA), student and city-wide fundraisers generated tens of thousands in donations among the $10 billion raised or pledged.

Since 2002, Beckett has been researching and writing about Haiti, as an insider embedded in the country for long stretches at a time. During his first post-quake visit to Port-au-Prince in March 2010, he saw untold damage.

He also saw first-hand how some slums, too gang-ridden for a United Nations presence, began self-directed recovery efforts including needs assessments they presented to non-governmental organizations. He felt their disappointment as non-Haitians and Haitian elites ultimately decided how and where the promised aid would be spent.

Beckett notes one well-meaning aid group started erecting a building—maybe a school, but residents still don't know for sure, although the walls remain—only to abandon the project after a couple of weeks. A makeshift camp, intended by aid agencies as stopgap housing until permanent homes could be built, has become a permanent and growing slum of 30,000-plus people, an internal displacement camp, only without any of the international aid that official designation of their status would connote.

"In the neighborhoods I work in, very little has changed. There are some new buildings but you go behind the buildings and the rubble is still there. It's just been pushed back."

Beckett said Haitians once talked about 'living the blackout' as shorthand for both their present reality and the decades of disruption and political upheaval. But in recent years that language has changed: "People are starting to say, "Life has become unlivable." I'm still grappling with how to make sense of that.

"Haiti is on the cusp of a humanitarian crisis—it's fair to say Haiti is worse off 10 years after the earthquake, by almost every metric."

He argues that continuous political, ecological, natural and economic crisis have become the norm. "It's more like a chronic illness than an acute illness, to use a medical metaphor," he said.

Canada and Western have been leaders in trying to remedy some of the literal chronic illnesses of Haiti.

The medical needs of the country after the earthquake prompted deployment of Canadian Forces' Canadian Field Hospital, with Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry professor Dr. Vivian McAlister as one of two general surgeons on the humanitarian/disaster response medical team.

He recalls passing by a mound of debris that had once been a cathedral, with 200 lives lost somewhere in the rubble. "There was not a stone that you could recognize."

McAlister recalled passing by another building that had half-collapsed. In front of the intact half of the home, a beautifully dressed woman swept dirt and debris away from the curtained doorway. "They're extraordinary people for living in constant deprivation and still finding ways to make it work," he noted.

During a span of 39 days, starting on Jan. 29, 2010, his team treated 4,922 patients and performed 167 operations. Most patients had serious conditions—botulism, septic shock, infections—linked more to years of medical neglect than to injuries sustained in the earthquake.

(Some other field hospitals were set up to treat only those injured in the earthquake, while the Canadian field hospital accepted everyone, with patient lineups starting at 7 a.m. each day).

The Haiti mission was similar in some respects to his 15 medical

missions in southern Afghanistan, said McAlister, who retired as a general in the Canadian Forces and AD McLachlin Professor of Surgery and Director of the Office of Military Academic Medicine.

One key difference, though, was that Afghanistan had once had a core of its own medical services before the Canadian surgeons' arrival. Haiti had little or none with its doctors having left years earlier for more stable North America.

Haiti's deep economic and political issues and other disasters such as hurricanes and deforestation—along with the international community's difficulties of getting aid to those who needed it most—has meant a long battle for recovery.

"They've almost converted crisis management into a substitute for good governance," McAlister said.

He shared Beckett's assessment of the difficulties of recovery for a country with such complex needs and circumstances: "When we think of it as the 10th anniversary (of the earthquake), for them, it's just another in a long line of crises."

"The earthquake hasn't finished, in a lot of ways," Beckett said. It is evident mostly in the absences: roads unbuilt, buildings promised but never constructed, government reforms halted and never restarted."

He said the aid effort would have been more effective if each Haitian had been given $1,000 outright, without the middleperson, and they would have built homes and businesses and schools.

For those who might say Haitians would have squandered the money, his ready response is that critics should look at what international aid achieved instead. "They spent billions of dollars since the earthquake to

build the poorest economy in the Western hemisphere, which is a poor return on investment."

There will be no return to "normal," because crisis has become normal.

But the daily protests against the president and the economic elite and even the shows they are craving to build change. Half the populace is younger than 20, he noted. "They've come of age in the post-earthquake period. They're a generation that no longer believes the solution of the international community or the political solutions of the country."

Beckett continues to hope for Haiti, because Haitians continue to hold out hope for themselves. "It's possible, and Haiti history shows miracles can happen," he said.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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