

Half a year after an earthquake, Haiti has a long way to go

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - Haiti is a country of conspicuous contrasts - a landscape both monochrome and vivid, and a people standing solidly, yet shaken to pieces.



The people of Haiti continue the slow, laborious process of removing rubble from an earthquake that shook the island in January. (PHOTO/Lauren Hollon)

Six months after an earthquake rocked Port-au-Prince, the city remains a mess. Every fifth building has collapsed into a broken mountain of rubble. Twisted, tangled rebar pokes out in all directions from great hills of dust and concrete.

“If I look at the big picture, I don’t see a whole lot of progress,” said Tim Brendle, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s disaster response coordinator for Haiti. “If you drive from Port-au-Prince, it’s 40 miles of destruction.”

Despite aid efforts, the removal of rubble moves at a snail’s pace. Most cleanup proceeds by hand.

“Progress in cleanup is very slow, but ongoing,” wrote Robert Shehane, Texas Baptists’ liaison for mission projects in Haiti, in an e-mail. The [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) is doing very much of it, he reported.

A recent mission team coordinated by Texas Baptists observed three or four

pieces of heavy machinery working on rubble removal.

“Some heavy equipment is seen in use, but for the most part I notice Haitian men and women in yellow USAID shirts with shovels,” Shehane wrote. “I have heard that the cleanup will be years in the doing.”

The conditions of the city’s roads and sanitation are deplorable, observers noted. Crater-sized potholes make side streets almost impossible to traverse without four-wheel drive.



Official estimates put unemployment in Haiti at 90 percent, but that doesn’t mean Haitians aren’t trying to make a living. People line the sidewalks of the capital, selling everything from shoeshines to carrots in the shade of crumbling buildings. (PHOTO/Lauren Hollon)

At any moment in the dirty roadside streams, one finds plastic bottles, smashed cardboard boxes, old shoes, food wrappers and faded scraps of fabric. Every space is a city dump; trash collects in the road, on the sidewalks, outside businesses and in rivers. Heaps of trash are blown, thrown and mingled into a nondescript gray mess in the gutters.

But it’s also apparent from Port-au-Prince’s landscape that Haitians love color. The contrast is like Dorothy’s Kansas and the wizard’s Oz. Anything not coated in ash-colored dust has been painted and repainted with a flamboyant display of color spanning the entire spectrum. Walls are splashed with vivid advertisements, and storefronts feature rainbow lists of the goods and services offered.

Public transportation is even more wildly decorated. Tap-taps—pickup

trucks with bench seats in the bed—and buses are painted with complex technicolor patterns.

Vendors, too, offer a colorful sight. Official estimates put unemployment in Haiti at 90 percent, but that doesn't mean Haitians aren't trying to make a living. People line the sidewalks of the capital, selling everything from shoeshines to carrots in the shade of crumbling buildings.

Away from the busiest part of town, tent communities are brimming. The lucky find themselves in fields of tents set up in neatly spaced rows by international aid organizations.

Others cobble together shelters using whatever they find—sticks, tarps, blankets, towels, corrugated metal salvaged from homes—building their precarious shelters one after the other next to the road, behind a bus stop and even on a 6-foot-wide median.



Nearly six months after an earthquake rocked Haiti, the island still bears the scars of the disaster.

(PHOTO/Lauren Hollon)

“As you come through Port-au-Prince, one of the tent cities actually used to be a playground,” said Scotty Smith, associate pastor of Cowboy Fellowship in Pleasanton and a volunteer in the rebuilding effort. “You can see the tarps draped over the slides and the play equipment and stuff, and people are living in those tent cities.”

The rain, sun and wind have taken their toll on the shelters. Edges of the plastic tarps hang in tatters. Many have begun leaking during storms.

“One interesting thing about the homes is that people have a phobia now. They don’t want to live under concrete roofs anymore,” Shehane said.

In addition to Haitians’ concerns about the safety and durability of new houses, new home building is made difficult by issues related to funding, land ownership and government restrictions.

“It’s always difficult to work through the bureaucracy here, and that’s true in many, many countries,” Brendle said. “First of all, because we have competing interests. We have the international aid community that wants to come in and have everything just flow in without any tariffs, without any bureaucracy, and that worked for a while after the disaster. But one of the major sources of income for this government is its tariffs from imports.”



Rice farmers in Haiti spend their days bent over in the hot sun, ankle- and wrist-deep in the paddies’ gray mud.
(PHOTO/Lauren Hollon)

Rural areas are as poor and depressed as the capital. Rice farmers spend their days bent over in the hot sun, ankle- and wrist-deep in the paddies’ gray mud. Many children wear torn, faded, stretched and dirty clothes. Clean water is scarce. Children and adults bathe nude in brown roadside streams swimming with bacteria and parasites. Medical care is equally hard to come by.

Outside Port-au-Prince, the country offers breathtaking scenery. To the right of the road going northwest out of the capital lush, gently sloping mountains disappear into the mist. To the left, a tranquil ocean as clear and warm as bathwater stretches along the coast. Observers note it’s easy to see opportunities for a tourist economy— if Haiti could overcome the recent devastation.

“If you’re asking how long it will take Haiti to rebuild, I would say decades,” Brendle said. “And who will do that? Basically the Haitians must do it. The best thing we can do right now is facilitate in the early stages and help them find methods they can replicate so they are able to continue to build on what we do initially.”

To support Texas Baptists’ disaster response effort, visit www.texasbaptists.org/give or send a check designated “disaster response” to Texas Baptist Missions Foundation, 333 N. Washington Ave, Dallas 75246.