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HEAVY RAINS UNDERSCORE NEEDS IN HAITI

By Emily Sollie

Port-au-Prince, February 18. – And then came the rain... Wednesday night, Haiti's capital experienced its heaviest rainfall since the earthquake, a soaking downpour that lasted for several hours. The storm, the second this week, foreshadowed things to come when the rainy season sets in next month.

“It has rained before, but not so hard and so long,” said Marie Lucie Osias, 37, who lives in a makeshift shelter in the Delmas 40-B encampment in Petionville, with her 10-year-old son. Her other three children died in the quake.

A home of garbage

“Our clothes got wet, everything got wet. I just tried to keep the water out the best I could,” she said. Whenever water started to pool in the tarp that serves as her roof, she would push it up with a stick and try to make sure it ran off to the outside instead of coming in.



The residents of Delmas 40-B live in very small shelters they have constructed from scavenged materials – bed sheets or pieces of plastic strung between sticks, their meager belongings piled inside on dirt floors. A lucky few have found pieces of wood or corrugated metal to put together a slightly more substantial structure. The morning after the rainstorm, the grounds of the camp had turned to thick, slippery mud. Photo: Jonathan Ernst/LWR/ACT Alliance.

No sleep in the rain

Ouslande Beaubrun, 30, another Delmas 40-B resident, lives with her cousin and two children in a shelter made of bed sheets. The cloth was not keeping the rain out, so they turned their mattress up on its side and spent the night standing on blocks inside their shelter to stay out of the mud. None of them got any sleep, she said. The National Weather Service is predicting above average rainfall for the next two weeks for Haiti, but notes, “excessive rainfall amounts are not expected.”

Still, shelter is a major concern, cited by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as one of the most urgent priorities facing the humanitarian community. OCHA estimates that only 24 percent of the 1.3 million people in need of shelter have received tarps or tents.

ACT Alliance members are prioritizing the delivery of shelter items in hopes of reaching as many people as possible before the rains come.

Can't build houses fast enough

“We’re all concerned about what to do when the rains come, but it seems the rains are already here – I think it’s an early onset rainy season,” said Sophie Gebreyes, program officer for Latin America and the Caribbean for the Lutheran World Federation Department of World Service, an ACT Alliance member.

“It’s a major concern for us, as for any humanitarian organization working here. We simply cannot build houses fast enough, so we’re starting with emergency shelter like distribution of plastic sheeting. We’ll also start soon with building transitional shelters, and providing building materials so people can build sturdier shelters before the hurricane season begins.” The issues of shelter and sanitation go hand in hand, she said, as the potential dangers of the rainy season include outbreaks of malaria, dengue, and waterborne diseases.

ACT member Diakonie has been providing tents in Jacmel since February 3, and is also planning for a longer-term solution. The idea, said Teodoro Anicceto, Diakonie’s emergency response coordinator in Jacmel, is to work with the people currently living in tents to clear the sites where their homes once stood, get them back on their land and in transitional shelters and get the camps cleared as quickly as possible.



People live in a tent community in Jacmel, Haiti, February 9, 2010. People across Haiti continue to deal with the aftermath of the devastating January 12 earthquake. (Photo by Jonathan Ernst/LWR/ACT Alliance)

Haiti's leadership has also said that shelter is a top priority. "Every time I meet with foreign leaders and delegations, I tell them that is the most urgent need," President Rene Preval told the Reuters news agency. "Now that we've attended to the wounded, taken away the dead, and we're distributing food and water, the problem of shelter . . . is the most urgent," he said.

"I have no plans"

Similkar Matilde, 40, who lost both her home and her husband in the earthquake, is now struggling to care for her six children. She does not know what she will do when the rainy season comes. "I don't have any plans, so I hope maybe I will receive a tent," she said. "I'm very worried about the rainy season."

Emily Sollie, Director for Communications and Media Relations for ACT Alliance member Lutheran World Relief, is currently serving as the ACT Alliance communicator in Haiti.