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The following report has been received from Lutheran World Information (LWI), the communications arm of the Lutheran World Federation.

Haiti: Earthquake Survivors Urgently Need Rain-Proof Housing *LWF World Service Director Impressed by Global Relief Response*

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti/GENEVA, 16 February 2010 (LWI) - One month after the devastating earthquake in Haiti, the first strong tropical rain surprised the survivors in their sheet-roofed shacks and caught them unprepared. Spontaneously a lot of people gathered in the center of the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince, demanding material for new accommodation, reported Bobby Waddell, the Haiti emergency senior advisor for the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Department for World Service (DWS).

Erecting rain-proof housing for hundreds of thousands of homeless Haitians remains a top priority. The first showers only heralded the imminent rainy season.

In the past few weeks the DWS Haiti country program staff have supplied thousands of people with clean drinking water, food and essential supplies. The demand is still enormous. The government says the 12 January earthquake, which registered seven on the Richter scale, cost at least 217,000 lives and injured about 300,000 people. The United Nations estimates that about 1.2 million people are currently homeless or living in makeshift accommodation.

DWS Haiti is working closely with other organizations in the ACT Alliance, the largest worldwide network of churches and church-related humanitarian and development agencies. ACT (Action by Churches Together) has provided over 150,000 people with water, food, hygiene sets and basic supplies. Medical care, emergency shelter and latrines remain a priority.

Yet aid distribution does not always run smoothly, as pointed out by Sylvia Raulo, director of the DWS Caribbean/Haiti program. One such operation had to be discontinued when it led to skirmishes, she explains. The basic principle is first to deal with the most vulnerable, which would mean primarily pregnant women and families with small children. But Raulo also understands people's plight; they are traumatized and in a desperate situation, which can lead to unpredictable over-reactions.

Regaining Hope Is Essential

Another factor is that the Caribbean state was one of the poorest countries in the world even before the earthquake. Decades of domestic and foreign exploitation, poor management, corruption and the consequences of numerous natural disasters drove the country to ruin. Nevertheless, says Raulo, the last few weeks have proven beyond any doubt, "Haitians are an extremely resilient people."

Raulo points out it is important that people regain hope. She says the challenges confronting the country and aid agencies are immense. While the fragile state institutions and problems like corruption only exacerbate the situation, in the end the solution would depend on whether "people have faith in the future" and are "able to demonstrate a will to rebuild, and perseverance to overcome the very difficult months and years to come," she adds.

Accommodation for 15,000 Families

After the initial emergency relief phase, the LWF plans to scale up its aid program in Haiti, says Rudelmar Bueno de Faria, DWS program coordinator. Preparations are underway for rehabilitation and reconstruction in close coordination with the ACT Alliance partner agencies. The next phase will include provision of education facilities, water and sanitation, temporary and permanent shelter, psychosocial care, agricultural tools and seeds. De Faria emphasizes the importance of agricultural recovery, adding that farmers are being encouraged to sow right away in anticipation of a harvest this year.

DWS efforts are concentrated in cities like Leogane and Gressier, and areas outside Port-au-Prince, where 80 percent of the population had their homes destroyed, de Faria explains. Tarpaulins and tents will be distributed for emergency accommodation. He underlines the need for close cooperation with local partners "to ensure orderly and trouble-free distribution."

According to de Faria, the LWF plans to provide shelter for 15,000 families (around 75,000 people) in four rural communes, 35 kilometers west of the capital. This is particularly urgent in view of the March/April rainy period, he says. The DWS program coordinator emphasizes the need to adhere to strict UN regulations for the new temporary accommodation: there must be 18.5 square meters per family, a corrugated iron roof, and wood, bamboo or steel frames well covered with plastic sheeting.

In the longer term, DWS Haiti will also focus on building more permanent housing. Plans for the next six to 18 months will include working with families to recycle existing materials on a "cash for work" principle. With the assistance of local masons and carpenters they can construct solid houses on stable foundations, using "already distributed iron sheets and at least some blocks and concrete base." The exact designs are "yet to be agreed," de Faria explains.

Overwhelming Worldwide Assistance

DWS Director Rev. Eberhard Hitzler says he is very impressed by the worldwide offers of assistance after the Haiti earthquake. Donations and aid are not just coming from the Northern hemisphere. In the whole of Latin America, in Africa and Asia, churches and agencies have launched appeals and provided aid. Many of them have also sent relief workers to Haiti to give practical back up.

Hitzler cites the decision by staff of two DWS associate programs to donate their wages for one day to support projects in Haiti. It was an impressive sign of solidarity, he states, that 2,000 members of the Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) in Bangladesh and the entire staff of Lutheran World Service India (LWSI) unanimously supported this initiative.

Furthermore, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone, which was expecting a container from the US-based Lutheran World Relief, decided to divert it to Haiti.

For Hitzler, such efforts are evidence that the LWF is a communion of churches in solidarity with the poor and needy. "Diakonia and giving are not a privilege of the rich churches," he says.

LWF member churches see World Service as "their arm and instrument for global diakonia," Hitzler concludes.