

# Trauma and Solidarity in the New Haiti

By Mark Schuller

I ARRIVED IN CHRIST-ROI, A MIXED-INCOME NEIGHBORHOOD in Port-au-Prince, on January 20 as part of a 13-person medical team organized by and for a local clinic, Hospice St. Joseph. Eight days had passed since the devastating earthquake. We arrived on one of the first civilian aid flights that the U.S. military, having seized the airport three days after the quake, allowed into the country.

The military's emphasis on using the airport to deploy troops to organize logistics—at the expense of delivering humanitarian aid, at least in the early days of the crisis—caused serious delays in providing desperately needed help. But the airport was not the only source of delays. The land route for delivering aid was closed off when the occupying United Nations forces closed the border with the Dominican Republic to prevent a flood of refugees. The only other viable option was by sea, but the earthquake destroyed the capital's port, where most of the country's goods arrive. Making matters worse, the quake damaged already bad roads connecting functioning ports in Saint-Marc and Cap-Haïtien.

Meanwhile, Haitian survivors took very good care of themselves. Haiti is home to a thriving tradition of *youn-ede-lòt* (one helping the other) and *konbit* (collective work groups). The country has also been imploding in recent years with political factionalism, often stoked by foreign agencies, and a growing resentment among almost all classes against five years of UN occupation forces, known in French as MINUSTAH and in Creole as *vole kabrit* (goat thieves). But for the moment, both political and economic divisions in Christ-Roi became the *ancien régime*. In the new Haiti wrought by the earthquake, middle-class people and *pèp la* (the country's poor majority) are all sleeping on the ground, looking out for one another and sharing what resources they have. Money has become less important than barter and relationships. Private property no longer exists.

Before I arrived, people on my block had already set up a medical clinic and an information-

gathering apparatus, connecting to the Internet and monitoring the radio. With minimal encouragement from me, organizers drew up a map of Christ-Roi, home to about 20,000 people, and went about the area collecting information about who was alive, who was dead; who was still trapped, whose home was still standing; what the urgent needs were, exactly how much water they had, exactly how much food; who had a car, who had buckets to transport water.

Despite their resilience and solidarity, however, people were visibly exhausted and traumatized. One day, a neighbor of mine insisted I eat the chicken on her plate of food, despite the scarcity of meat. Surprised, I asked why. "Because it looks too much like the flesh of my mother, who is still buried beneath our house," she said.

In a catastrophe of this magnitude, solidarity among Haitians can go only so far. The U.S. military is providing aid, especially trauma surgeries, but Haiti has been under military occupation since 2005, and many people remember the violent 2004 coup d'état that precipitated the occupation. Given that the U.S. government played an important role in that coup, many earthquake survivors feel they have no reason to trust the new occupiers. The same can be said for many large NGOs, which many Haitians perceive as having gotten rich off of their poverty; many scoff at this "NGO class."

The urgent challenge is how to help survivors make their needs known and to connect them with outside resources. When the acute crisis ends, the priority will be to meet the daily needs of some 1 million displaced people. The onus is on foreign governments and large NGOs to avoid riots by delivering aid in a timely, respectful manner. This is not only the right thing to do but also the key to middle-term plans for rebuilding Haiti's self-sufficiency—especially in the peasant economy, destroyed by neoliberalism—and long-term plans for building a sustainable Port-au-Prince. ■

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