



This season's hurricanes have made homes in Gonaïves, Haiti, unlivable, and conditions primed for environmental disaster will lead to more ecological refugees. Tallulah Photography photo.

Haiti's road to ruin

Few are helping Haitians recover from natural disaster—and still fewer see the bigger problem

BY ROBERTA STALEY

The drive north to Gonaïves from Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince is calculated in time rather than distance—it can take from three-and-a-half to five hours, depending upon rain and your four-wheel-drive's suspension, to navigate the 150 kilometres of erosion-gnawed road that skirt the country's coastline.

But nothing on the journey—not the cavernous potholes, trenches, or caved-in shoulders—prepares you for the apocalyptic dried-mud moonscape that is Gonaïves. More than two months after hurricanes Fay, Gustav, and Ike and tropical storm Hanna battered Haiti from August 17 to September 8, Gonaïves is barely better off than it was right after the tempests.

Mounds of dried mud cover city streets that United Nations tanks, motorcycles, and SUVs churn into thick dust that hangs like a grey-beige fog. Starving dogs, their vertebrae and ribs jutting through dry, pale hide, skirt among the wheels in a single-minded search for food, sometimes dragging limbs crushed by lurching vehicles.

The hurricanes skinned Gonaïves's surrounding hills and mountains—denuded of trees for decades—as deftly as a taxidermist, allowing unfettered rivers of topsoil, clay, and water to submerge 80 percent of the city in goop more than a storey high. When the water evaporated, two-metre-deep mud remained. At least 466 people perished from August to September—more than double the number of people who were killed in the rest of the country. As of November, many of the surrounding rice, banana, and plantain fields were still flooded, as were homes on the outskirts of the city. (In total, about 70 percent of Haiti's crops were wiped out, according to the United Nations' World Food Programme.)

Bulldozers have started the cumbersome task of shifting tonnes of topsoil and clay from roadways, manoeuvring around overturned and crushed vehicles encased in mud like fossils. Some of the 300,000 residents who have returned to find the walls of their one- and two-room houses still standing are using shovels to dig out the thick, cracking earth, leaving chunks mixed with rotting trash outside doorways. But the homes are unlivable, and families dwell in tents on rooftops, leaving the city's 40,000 female-headed households vulnerable to sexual predators. Too few trucks carry the mud away, and much of it is simply pushed into hills in the middle of intersections or along one side, creating a surreal version of a giant child's sandbox.

MSF-B has managed—minimally—to meet the needs of hundreds of thousands of citizens, creating a replacement water system and a new hospital as well as a mobile-clinic system serving the urban and rural populations still isolated by impassable streets and roads. A handsome, almost rakish, man with green eyes and a jagged front tooth, Stienen was given the task of creating a temporary replacement for the destroyed water and sanitation systems. With the water mains clogged with mud, MSF-B sends several tanker trucks of water every day from a deep well it drilled in September outside the city. The tankers drain chlorinated water into pipes that link to bladders, enormous canvas water containers that, in turn, are linked to communal taps scattered throughout the city.

With the project set to end January 15, the MSF-B team is working desperately to try to ensure the rudimentary water system is expanded and can be maintained by local government workers. However, with the city still blanketed by mud, it is impossible to create any sort of sanitation system, Stienen says. Without toilets, people relieve themselves in the street and behind the mud mounds, with the result that dried excrement mixes with the dust-laden air. Rebuilding the sanitation system is dependent upon all the mud being cleared away, a task that could take a year, Stienen says.

MSF-B feels isolated and overwhelmed by the need; MINUSTAH, the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti, should be doing more, Stienen says. "You don't like to bash the UN, but we had a coordination meeting and you would think they were talking about something else," says Stienen, leaning back, loose-limbed, in a white plastic chair in the shade, dressed in wide-leg linen pants, brightly coloured loose shirt, and red flip-flops in the more than 30°C heat. "Other NGOs and the UN, you see their reaction and it's as if they don't care. Where does this apathy come from? Why are they so indifferent?"

Before the hurricanes, most of Gonaïves's 300,000 citizens obtained their water from about 5,000 communal wells. However, these are also contaminated with mud and must be cleaned out and fitted with new pumps, something MSF-B is also trying to do before it withdraws. "Normally," Stienen says, "this would be the World Health Organization who would do

this, but they're not here either."

Stienen is especially worried by the UN's apparent inability to ensure the safety of the citizens of Gonaïves. The incidence of rape is so high among women, perched on roofs with their children in the dark, that MSF-B has added a psychologist to its mobile clinic to provide trauma counselling. "You ask them, 'How long will you sit on your roof?' They say, 'We are forgotten by the government and the UN,'" Stienen says. "This is not security, to sit on the roof with no electricity. So it adds to my question: 'Is the government and UN taking it seriously?'"

Stienen muses that what lies at the root of international apathy is simple cynicism over Haiti's propensity for disaster. Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, weathered a severe storm four years ago when hurricane Jeanne killed about 3,000 people. Foreign aid rebuilt the water and sanitation system in Gonaïves and the international community faces the obligation of rebuilding it once more. Once it's constructed, it is only a matter of time before more hurricanes destroy it again. "People say Haiti is complicated, but this is not a reason not to care," Stienen says. "Maybe that's where the apathy comes from, because this country is unmanageable."

Brazil's Maj.-Gen. Carlos Alberto Dos Santos Cruz, force commander of MINUSTAH since January 2007, addresses the question of security several days later in an interview in Port-au-Prince. In Gonaïves, the main task of the local UN force, which consists of about 500 Argentine and Pakistani troops as well as local police, is to maintain a safe environment, but "in practice we keep the stability through support of the local police," Santos Cruz says.

During the hurricanes, he says, UN troops threw themselves into humanitarian assistance: evacuating patients from La Providence Hospital (a once-pretty white-and-green facility, renovated after the 2004 hurricane, that is now mired in dried, grey muck), saving the medicines, and assisting birthing women. Now, Santos Cruz says, the main focus is guarding the warehouse where supplies are stored for the World Food Programme (WFP), which allocated US\$33 million for emergency food supplies at the beginning of September. (Only one-third of this amount has been forthcoming from member states.) However, Stienen condemned a decision by the WFP to stop distributing food after fights broke out at a depot weeks after the hurricanes. The WFP cited mismanagement of the depot and a lack of safety as reasons for stopping distribution. WFP Haiti spokesperson Hilary Clarke says that the UN organization still managed to deliver food to women staying in shelters in Gonaïves.

Regular food distribution has resumed, Clarke says, and virtually all of Gonaïves's citizens are receiving food packages every two weeks containing such staples as rice, beans, and oil, most of it imported from the United States. Still, some children have sickened from lack of food and show

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