

From Relief to Recovery: The American Red Cross Response in the Wake of Haiti's Devastating Earthquake

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At 4:53 p.m. on January 12, Matthew Marek, the American Red Cross country representative for Haiti, was in his office working with two of his Haitian colleagues when the ground started shaking. He screamed, “Anba biwo a!” (Get under your desks!) They all stayed under their desks while listening to thousands of screams from the surrounding neighborhood, as the shaking continued.

“It lasted too long,” said Marek. “I know because I had time to think about death.” When the shaking stopped, Marek noticed it was dusty and much brighter in the office. “I peered out from under my desk onto the neighborhood, not through a window but through what had been the office wall. It was no longer there; blown completely out and replaced by hundreds of people running and screaming.”

The three of them made their way outside through the blown out wall. “I was overwhelmed. I looked to the bidonvilles on the mountainside and saw clouds of dust and hundreds of homes turned to rubble. In a matter of minutes, our neighbors started showing up with their wounded and we got to work.”

Within two hours, Marek and other Red Cross volunteers began administering first aid and assessing the damage caused by the earthquake. The American Red Cross also immediately made available all the relief supplies including blankets, kitchen sets, and water containers from our nearby warehouse in Panama (enough for 5,000 families) in support of relief efforts.

Immediately after the earthquake, I found myself in the International Response Operations Center at the American Red Cross National Headquarters in Washington, DC, where the international disaster response team was working around the clock. I was and remain incredibly proud of the collaborative, yet seamless effort, led by our indefatigable CEO Gail McGovern, Senior Vice President of International Services David Meltzer and Senior Director of International Response and Programs Nan Buzard. The coordination from the beginning between our domestic and international teams, the integration of efforts by the local Red Cross Chapters and National Headquarters, and the swift cooperation between the American Red Cross, Geneva's International Federation and the ICRC demonstrate the power and strength of the global Red Cross movement.

Though Haiti is no stranger to disasters, weathering several severe hurricanes in recent years, January's earthquake has proved to be Haiti's most devastating natural disaster in centuries, leaving as many as 230,000 dead and an estimated 1.3 million homeless. To meet the enormous needs of the people of Haiti, the American Red Cross is now

engaged in the largest single-country relief operation in global Red Cross history. Staff members from the American Red Cross are working as part of the 600 Red Cross and Red Crescent person team from more than 40 countries. Currently, 21 Red Cross Emergency Response Units have been deployed, offering technical support for relief and shelter, water and sanitation, internet and telecommunications, or critical medical care at field hospitals and basic health centers.

As a result of the coordinated Red Cross effort, at least 1.9 million individuals have already received basic, yet life-sustaining items such as food, water containers, tarps, rope, hygiene kits and cooking items. The Red Cross has delivered more than 30 million liters of safe drinking water, benefiting 290,000 people regularly, and more than 33,600 people have been treated by Red Cross health care facilities and mobile teams. A massive coordinated vaccination campaign is also underway, inoculating children against measles, whooping cough, tetanus and diphtheria. Approximately 60,000 people have already been vaccinated as an important preventative measure to avoid an additional humanitarian tragedy stemming from disease. The Red Cross and its partners are also on track to provide tarpaulins, tents, ropes, timber uprights and toolkits to the nearly 1.3 million people without shelter on or before May 1, ensuring that families are protected as the rainy season quickly approaches. Working together, the global Red Cross network is an extremely effective and expansive engine for the relief effort in Haiti.

The partnership between the American Red Cross and the Haitian Red Cross has been especially powerful, exponentially increasing our reach. Working shoulder to shoulder with the 3,000 Haitian Red Cross volunteers from Port-au-Prince and 10,000 volunteers nationwide who speak the language, are familiar with the geography and are trusted within the communities, the Red Cross is able to identify the most vulnerable communities, safely distribute the supplies, keep the beneficiaries informed and ensure that the immediate needs are being met. The trust that the people of Haiti have in the Haitian Red Cross, coupled with the power of the emblem, has ensured that Red Cross distributions, which are always conducted without armed security, are secure and executed with precision.

I traveled to Port-au-Prince on February 20 and found myself lacking the ability to adequately describe, and even in some ways comprehend, the number of people in need, the amount of rubble that remains in the city, and the extent of this disaster. This is the most devastating disaster I have visited, and I have seen many in my six years as Chairman of the Board of Governors of the American Red Cross. Even the most seasoned disaster response professionals with whom I traveled were stunned by the sheer scale of the devastation and the significant number of people in need. The ongoing effects of the earthquake are compounded by the fact that not only is this one of the largest disasters of the decade, but it is affecting the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. While the needs in Haiti were vast before the earthquake, the deprivation now seems inescapable.

I am grateful to the 100 American Red Cross staff and volunteers who have been deployed to Haiti. It was a privilege to meet many of them late in the evening at our Red Cross base camp. This camp, by the way, is the construction site for a future Hilton hotel.

There are no windows or doors, only open spaces that have been converted into makeshift offices, logistics and communications hubs, and medical coordination centers. These inspiring, mostly young (or at least *young* at heart) individuals have been working tirelessly for weeks, responding to the immense needs by distributing food, clean water, hygiene kits, cooking items, and facilitating critical medical care.

During my trip, I also met many Haitian Red Cross volunteers, who are themselves still grieving, but have had unrelenting courage in the face of the terrible suffering that they and their nation are experiencing. I encountered Red Cross psychosocial volunteers who were themselves victims of the earthquake, but were already giving back by offering support and counseling to those who had lost loved ones. Local ownership of the relief effort is an essential step not only in the healing process, but also in empowering the Haitian people to rebuild their nation and restore their hope.

The emergency relief efforts in Haiti are likely to extend through the month of June, and the Red Cross expects to be involved in recovery efforts for years to come. The American Red Cross will ensure that long-term recovery efforts are executed in a comprehensive and sustainable way, anticipating future disasters to which Haiti is prone. Critical infrastructure systems must meet higher standards of hazard resilience. We will also strengthen the disaster preparedness program, already in place in Haiti prior to the earthquake, in order to standardize the Haitian National Red Cross Society's method of preparing for and responding to disasters.

As recovery plans are being developed and put into place, the American Red Cross will continue to strategically partner with organizations outside the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to ensure that priority needs are being met. For example, we recently allocated funds to Habitat for Humanity to buy emergency shelter materials, as emergency and transitional shelters are urgently needed for survivors. To complement ongoing aid distributions, we are also working with Fonkoze, Haiti's largest microfinance institute, to provide financial assistance to help an initial 16,000 families purchase and replace essential items over the next six months.

The needs in Haiti are immense, and it is clear that what took minutes to destroy will take many years and the collective support from governments and relief agencies around the world to repair. If support and commitment wane as the television cameras and the journalists depart, the result will surely be despair and desperation. I am confident, however, that as long as the American people and the international community remain engaged, the people of Haiti will continue to get the support they so desperately need.

The American Red Cross will certainly be there empowering individuals to mend their lives, preparing communities for the next disaster, restoring livelihoods, and ensuring dignity for the people of Haiti until the last donated dollar is spent, as they surely deserve nothing less.