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## Aid Groups Focus on Haiti's Homeless

By [RAY RIVERA](#) and [DAMIEN CAVE](#)

JACMEL, Haiti — [Haiti](#) has approved plans for more than a dozen sprawling tent cities in and around Port-au-Prince, the first step in an epic relocation effort that could reshape the country as up to one million people displaced by the [earthquake](#) find new places to live.

Here in one of the cities hardest hit by the earthquake — as in Port-au-Prince, the capital — the housing needs are acute, and demand for shelter has intensified. Officials with the Haitian government and the [United Nations](#) said Thursday that they were moving as quickly as possible to establish organized camps, with water, food and health care, before the rainy season starts to peak in May.

“A lot of these people have maybe a sheet on four sticks over their heads right now,” said Niurka Piñeiro, a spokeswoman for the [International Organization for Migration](#). “It’s really urgent that we get these tents so we can provide a little better cover from the elements.”

Haitian and international officials, aware that these camps may become permanent, are hotly debating locations. In Phase 2 of the plan, private companies would be contracted to build apartment complexes and homes with the help of residents living in the tents.

“We are hoping that this concentration of people will lead to work,” said Patrick Delatour, the minister of tourism, after a meeting with President [René Préval](#). “They will help build their own housing.”

Officials with the migration agency have argued for sites inside cities close to employment, while Haitian government ministers have stressed the need to build as much shelter as fast as possible.

Already, work has begun on government land near the suburb of Croix des Bouquets. United Nations troops from Brazil have begun leveling the ground in preparation for a tent city for around 30,000 people. Officials hope to house 100,000 people with the dozen or so sites selected so far, which include the lawn of the prime minister’s office, but getting the tents to Haiti remains a difficult challenge.

A handful arrived Wednesday, and a larger shipment from Turkey and other countries came Thursday, but Ms. Piñeiro said thousands more would be needed. “We are really looking for family-sized tents,” she said. “But at this point, we’ll take anything.”

Here on the southern coast in Jacmel, the country's fourth-largest city, where it has rained several times since the earthquake last week, every drop from the sky brings another round of fear.

Whole sections of the once vibrant downtown, about 25 miles southwest of Port-au-Prince, were flattened in the earthquake. Most of the city's 40,000 residents are now homeless. While they say they need food, water and medicine, when asked for their top priority, they shout "tent, tent." Nothing is lost in translation because the Creole word is the same as the English one.

Patricia Legros is living in a bus-long shamble of blue tarps and shower curtains with an American flag for a door. She lives with her parents, a brother, cousins, neighbors. There is an artist, a taxi driver, a police officer, a tailor — 30 people in all. They sleep side by side on mattresses pulled from the rubble. Each night three of the men stand guard by firelight to keep cars from running them down.

Charles Mary René, 22, who has been living on a blanket in Toussaint Louverture Square here since the earthquake with her 3-year-old son and his father, Eddy Leonard, said that during the few times it rained, they just sat and got soaked. "What could we do, we have nowhere to go," she said.

Each night before they go to bed, like people everywhere in Haiti left homeless by the earthquake, they pray for some miracle before the rainy season sends water flooding in.

The answer for now is tents — and there are not nearly enough.

An aid group, [Plan International](#), handed out 400 tents in Jacmel on Tuesday and planned to provide 300 more on Wednesday to people on a list provided by a local official. But when the group showed up at a homeless camp, hundreds rushed the vehicles carrying the tents, desperate for shelter, illustrating the difficulty of delivering aid.

"They had to leave without giving out a single one," said Benjamin Legoff, a French firefighter who was coordinating a medical clinic in the camp.

"Organization is the most important thing," he added. "The means without organization is nothing."

Robin Costello, a spokeswoman for the group, said the reason the group left was "to make sure nobody got hurt."

But for the people of Jacmel, it was another sign that the aid supply failed to match demand.

In Port-au-Prince, the frantic need for shelter is just as strong. Estimates from the United Nations suggest that every other building in the capital has collapsed. With frequent aftershocks rattling the city, almost all of Port-au-Prince's roughly four million residents, including temporary residents, seem to be sleeping under the stars.

The International Organization for Migration has counted at least 447 ad hoc camps throughout the capital. The parks are full of people surviving under billowing sheets, washing themselves and their clothes in the open, but displaced families can also be found in the parking lot of a Domino's, on soccer fields behind churches and in grassy fields by the airport.

Without rain in the capital, people are mostly waiting patiently for help. On the lawn of the prime minister's office, Alain Jean François worked under the only sturdy tent available: a medical tent set up by the Red Cross. A physician's assistant with large hands in latex gloves, he said he had been living in the camp with five relatives since the day after the quake.

His home had collapsed, and while treating wounds has become his day job, he said that many of his patients had begun to worry about what would happen when it rained. "People here are very frightened because of the rain," he said. "It's very difficult."

The tents will be only a partial solution. Ms. Piñeiro, the spokeswoman for the migration organization, said the canvas tents she was expecting lacked hard floors, raising concerns that they might be washed away in a large storm.

Finding the serviceable locations in a country with so much damaged infrastructure has also been a challenge.

"The criteria is that they must have water," Mr. Delatour said. "They must be in government hands or in private hands at the disposal of the government, and that they can be developed not just for housing, but also for services such as health care."

The camps now filled with squatters are ad hoc societies of desperate people, who teeter between order and chaos. Outside the prime minister's office, where 3,650 people now live, according to the Red Cross, people pile their trash in one place. Grass has been worn down in paths between different areas.

But anxiety lies just below the surface. When the Red Cross distributed rice and beans for the second time Thursday around lunchtime — not everyone was served in the morning — a scrum of shouting and shoving greeted the aid workers. Eventually people lined up quietly, so close they looked sewn together.

In Jacmel, the battle to get food and other aid supplies tends to be even more brutal. The largest of the encampments is at a soccer field a few blocks from the town square, where officials say 5,900 people are living, only a handful in tents, the rest in whatever material they can find. Residents and aid workers say that near-melees break out when the one meal, at 4 p.m., begins. And even then, what people grab can be hard to hold on to.

"You are sleeping and people reach their hands in and try to take your stuff," said Jimmy Jean Philippe, 33, who has been living in the camp since the quake. "That's why we need security."

*Damien Cave reported from Port-au-Prince and Ray Rivera from Jacmel, Haiti. Neil MacFarquhar contributed reporting from the United Nations.*

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