

EUROPEAN COMMISSION



Humanitarian Aid

Letter from Haiti

by Juan Carlos Rincón-Domínguez, ECHO Regional Information Officer for Latin America and the Caribbean.

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I landed in Port au Prince on Saturday with one of the few United Nations humanitarian flights. I must confess that this has been one of the strangest and at the same time moving weekends of my life, as a human being and as a communicator. You never like to visit a country for the first time during such a tragic situation.

It is difficult to imagine how strong people are in this kind of disaster. People who have lost everything but their lives, stand up, continue to work, to help others, to go to church and sing prayers or to play music and begin to rebuild. Port au Prince is a big quarry full of materials that the people are using again, like zinc, wood, cast iron and steel bars.

It is true that there is a lot of rubble around, that families are still living on the streets or in tents, and that they depend on food aid and humanitarian help.

But the local transport's colorful tap-tap's (small, highly decorated pick-up's) are running again, the street markets have been displaced to areas where people are crowded together, groups of local communities are removing and clearing debris from many areas, and the government has announced that this Monday, the schools will re-open.

This weekend, the third since the earthquake, it seems that things are beginning to improve. Food is being distributed and decisions will soon be taken on shelters and new settlements which will improve the lives of displaced people.

For the first time under the authority of the Haitian government, the World Food Programme (WFP), one of ECHO's partners, has established key food distribution points. "It was a significant day for us because we started the distribution from fixed sites around the capital", said Marcus Prior, spokesman of WFP.

The UN agency has identified 16 sites in Port au Prince – such as the Presidential Palace, the Champ de Mars and the football stadium – the largest spaces where people settled after the earthquake. "Nine of them are fully operational and we only began today. Five others need additional work but will be ready tomorrow or in two days", explained Marcus.

The WFP are now distributing 400 tonnes of food daily per site and the idea is to reach 10,000 people at each location during the next two weeks – 160,000 people in total. "The

system lets us reach people more quickly and improves the distribution network for food and humanitarian supplies”, added Marcus.

On Saturday afternoon, President René Preval visited the European Union compound in Log Base - the airport area where all the humanitarian organisations, including ECHO are based. He asked for news on the programmes for re-settlement.

The European Civil Protection Mechanism (MIC), which includes all EU Member States, are coordinating with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Haitian Government, to assess and decide on the strategy for establishing safer and better temporary shelters, before the rainy season starts at the end of February.

This Monday, the German Red Cross, also an ECHO partner which is being funded by the fast-track humanitarian decision of €3 million, will be distributing water buckets, household kits and plastic sheeting in Port au Prince.

It is a pity that some media have left Haiti this first weekend when things are beginning to look better. They may have left the field following the caustic premise that “good news is no news”. On the contrary, there is news. More donors, more European actions, more countries, new humanitarian organisations, new partners and the Haitian government and people, all of them are increasingly working together.

It was a strange weekend, sunny and clear, and maybe the beginning of “normality” - if it can be described like that after such a tragedy. It was also the first full moon after the earthquake. In the middle of the night, when Port au Prince is in darkness (only 20% of the city has electricity), this is a blessing.