

# Still homeless from Haiti earthquake, thousands fight forced evictions

Six months on, the government has yet to secure adequate shelter for many of the 2.1 million people made homeless by the Haiti earthquake. Some landowners are now trying to evict the refugee camps.



Earthquake-displaced people wait in line to receive supplies at the Canahan 2 camp, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, June 30. Some landowners are trying to evict displaced people from Haiti earthquake refugee camps.

(Alexandre Meneghini/AP Photo)

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Port-au-Prince, Haiti —

Tens of thousands of Haitians risk becoming homeless for a second time, as weary landowners clear their properties of makeshift refugee camps in order to build new homes or sell their land on Haiti's booming real-estate market.

Of 1,241 refugee camps here, only 206 are officially recognized, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Only the official camps are monitored by NGOs, meaning that the majority lack protection.

"Nobody is really watching," says Deepa Pachang, a volunteer with International Action Ties, a nonprofit organization monitoring illegal evictions. "Sometimes authorities show up at a camp and all the people are already gone."

## IN PICTURES: Relocating in Haiti

This past spring, the government Commission of Damage Assessment, Temporary Shelter, Demolition and Reconstruction reportedly identified several sites totaling 6 million square meters (some 1,500 acres) for relocating people to the perimeters of the capital. Lengthy negotiations to secure the land have yet to secure relocation options for the 2.1 million people left homeless from the Jan. 12 earthquake.

Now, forced evictions from refugee camps are on the rise, officials say. With landowners exasperated by the slow pace, some are taking matters into their own hands.

## Landowners want property back

Ralph Stevens Stephen, godson of the landowner of a property in the Delmas 60 neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, which has been used as an unofficial refugee camp since January, recently visited the camp with 10 armed men in police uniforms to coerce the 178 homeless people here to leave.

"This is private land, these people have to take off," Mr. Stephen says. He says he has been telling residents to leave since April, and he is convinced that most squatters would go home if they weren't trying to get compensation from the government. "The government doesn't owe anything to these people," he says.

Resident Oxeana Ismael remembers the day that the armed men showed up — with no official identification and driving unmarked cars — and threatened to return with tear gas if the homeless did not leave within 15 days. That was in early June.

"They asked me if I live here, and told me that I have to take down my tent and go," says the middle-aged woman, who since January has shared a makeshift shelter here with five relatives, including her mentally disabled brother. She and several other residents say the men pointed their weapons at those present and asked for their names.

Subsequently, Haiti's Ministry of Justice and Public Security issued a report that said a number of the Delmas camp residents "declared they were ready to leave the property by June 22," according to a copy obtained by the Monitor.

## Many buildings still not safe

But residents say they never volunteered to leave, as they have nowhere to go. The camp committee says only 14 of the camps' 44 families were homeowners before the earthquake, and all their houses were either damaged or destroyed. Of the 188,383 destroyed or

damaged homes, only 66,967 have been assessed for safety so far, according to OCHA. Of these, 42 percent have been deemed safe for reoccupation, but only half of those have actually been reoccupied, mainly because people no longer have money to rent.

As episodes of violent eviction have been reported at some refugee camps, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN's monitor on housing issues, has played mediator between landowners and camp residents.

"If we are aware of one, we try to reach a compromise with the owners," says IOM spokesman Leonard Doyle, citing one successful case.

Mr. Doyle says he is currently aware of about 30 camps that have been forcibly evicted or are at risk of imminent eviction, though he says details are sketchy.

"We haven't heard of violence, but we did hear of armed groups entering camps," he says. "I can't say how that's related to evictions, but I can make an educated guess."

Haitian National Police spokesman Franz Koloeur says he has not heard of a violent expulsion in a "long" time and that most cases of threats and complaints are reported as simple "arguments" and dealt with by local police precincts. He says all expulsions must be first authorized by a court, although even a three-week government moratorium on forced evictions in April did little, if anything, to slow the problem.

"People can't make their own justice, people can't expel other people themselves," he says. "If an owner uses weapons or threats, they will have problems with the police themselves."

Haiti's Ministry of Interior declined to comment.

## 'We have no homes'

At the refugee camp in the Delmas 60 neighborhood, 10 families have already left due to intimidation, but most residents don't know where to go.

"They told us to go back to our homes, but we have no homes," says Jireau Museau, a member of the camp committee, who lost his house and grocery store in the earthquake. He and other residents must use toilets in a nearby settlement because nearby homeowners prevented NGOs from building latrines on the property. "If we had another place to go, we would have left already," he says.

As of Friday, camp residents were still on the property, but many say this won't last long. The property owner threatened to evict them this week.

Standing by her tent as the daily rain started, Ms. Ismael says she is just waiting.

"If they come back," she says, "I'll just move right out of the camp and stay on the road."

### IN PICTURES: Relocating in Haiti

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