



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

see next page

Check out...  
STRAIGHT.COM  
Post your comments on this and other stories on our Web site

## 40% OFF Hi-End Equipment Sale

### MONO AMPLIFIERS

Nº434

\$6000 USD pair



**Power Output:** 125 Watts per Channel RMS @ 8 Ohms  
250 Watts per Channel RMS @ 4 Ohms  
**Signal/Noise Ratio:** Better than -80dB (ref. 1W, 8 Ohms)  
**Input Complement:** One 3-pin XLR Balanced Input  
One RCA Input Connectors  
One 3.5mm Trigger In/Out Jack



MADRIGAL AUDIO LABORATORIES

### DUAL-MONO

Nº431

AMPLIFIER

**Power Output:** 200 Watts per Channel RMS @ 8 Ohms  
400 Watts per Channel RMS @ 4 Ohms  
**Signal/Noise Ratio:** Better than -65dB (ref. 2.83V)  
**Input Complement:** Two 3-pin XLR Balanced Input  
Two RCA Input Connectors  
Two 1/8" mini-jacks for Remote

Product of the Year - Electronic House



\$42000 USD

Monitor Research Audio & Video

110-11180 Bridgeport Road, Richmond

Mon-Fri 11-6 pm Sat 1-5 pm

Hi-End Audio | Flat Panel Televisions | Home Theatre Solution

604.279.9995 | www.mrav.ca

## Haiti's road to ruin

from previous page

signs of protein starvation, called kwashiorkor: reddish, thinning hair; enlarged abdomen; sad, sagging faces; stick-thin arms and legs; and edema so severe it cracks the skin. At MSF-B's new Hôpital Secours Gonaïves, built in a warehouse once used by the humanitarian group CARE, 15-month-old Cindjina sits on the lap of her mother, Thelse Almonur, in the pediatric ward. Cindjina was 5.9 kilograms, the average weight of a two-month-old, when she was admitted September 27. Thelse is feeding her daughter a peanut-butter paste mixed with vitamins. The paste has helped Cindjina gain weight and, six weeks later, she is up to 6.5 kilograms, still four kilograms below the average weight for her age.

Generally, about one-third of children in Haiti suffer from chronic malnutrition. However, a recent survey by the aid organization Action Contre la Faim showed the malnutrition level in Gonaïves to be about four percent, due in large part to the large-scale food distribution, Clarke says.

Stienen shakes his head. "In Gonaïves, you see more than chronic malnutrition. It is a weakened population, with the most vulnerable being the children. Those families with four to five children, they suffer the most."

The future does not look promising for Gonaïves's people. National food shortages have put the country in a "highly volatile situation", according to the WFP's Bettina Luescher, speaking from her UN office in New York City. The WFP is planning to begin phasing out food distribution in Gonaïves in 2009 to "avoid creating a context of assistance and food dependency".

Some people think that a simple solution to this enormous problem would be to move Gonaïves, which sits below sea level at the confluence of three rivers, to higher ground. Stienen laughs humourlessly at the notion; this will never happen, he says. There are neither sufficient resources nor the political will to relocate 300,000 souls up the steep, bare, infertile, erosion-prone hills and mountains.

**WHAT LIES AT** the root of this dilemma? Environmental degradation caused by the wholesale cutting of trees. A century ago, Haiti was a tropical rainforest with huge stands of mahogany. However, 20th-century exploitation by foreign corporations and the Haitian government's need to service an egregious national debt owed its former slave-owning colonial master, France, meant that much of the forest cover was felled for cash. Now only 1.5 percent of the country is forested, according to the UN—a sharp contrast to the lush Dominican Republic, a country adjoining Haiti on the same West Indies island.

But the people of Haiti are also responsible for deforestation. The majority of Haiti's 9.5 million people rely upon charcoal for cooking; most electricity is privately generated and there is no gas or kerosene. Charcoal is made by cutting down a tree, leaving it to dry in the sun, then slowly cooking it in a makeshift kiln. In an effort to preserve the life of the tree, the stump is left, with the hope it will send out shoots. This woeful attempt at silviculture is largely unsuccessful. In the area around Gonaïves, Stienen says, there are fewer trees than there were in 2004.

The string of environmental disasters experienced by Gonaïves, as well as other places around the world, is giving rise to a world phenomenon: ecological refugees. Rising sea levels and more destructive cyclones and hurricanes that experts link to global warming, as well as widespread deforestation and erosion, have created populations of desperate people fleeing disasters. In Gonaïves, for example, Stienen estimates that there are only 10,000 male-headed households, one quarter the number of female-headed families. The rest of the men have fled to other countries for jobs and a more secure life. However, their families

cannot follow and are left to carry on a life of struggle and, possibly, worse hunger than they face now.

But fleeing can be as dangerous as staying. No one knows this better than 22-year-old Timanit Cherisma. Cherisma lies silent on her side in the obstetrics ward of the MSF-B hospital, an intravenous drip in one arm. Just an hour ago, Cherisma gave birth to twin girls. But there is no joy in the room, and the only sound is muted mewling, like new kittens, from the twins, bound in a blue blanket on a cot. The father of the infants died after his boat capsized while he was fleeing Haiti to try to find work in the Bahamas. The twins have no home to go to—it was washed away in the flood. "I see no hope for the babies," Cherisma's mother, 48-year-old Tazilia Esenvile, says in Creole.

Back in Port-au-Prince, a handful of courageous people are making an 11th-hour attempt to turn back the tide of total environmental degradation in Haiti, which, at 27,750 square kilometres, is about three-quarters the size of Vancouver Island. The Fondation Seguin was cofounded in 2004 by Serge Cantave to try to save the country's last remaining pockets of natural forest and to educate teachers and youth about conservation. Through its Ecole Verte program, a sense of responsibility toward the environment is also being cultivated when students travel to mountain regions to plant trees. To date, 30,000 trees have been planted by students, says Cantave, whose organization is financially supported by the development organization Yéle Haiti, headed by Haitian-American hip-hop artist Wyclef Jean.

Without reforestation, Haiti will simply wash away into the ocean. "It will disappear," says Cantave, who estimates it will take a century of dedicated tree-planting to reverse the clear-cutting. The way this can be achieved, Cantave says, is for the Fondation Seguin to work with an international network of ecological groups. Cantave looks to British Columbia, which has spawned generations of dedicated environmentalists, for help in coordinating tree-planting programs and educating Haiti's young. "We are asking you to share with us your experiences," Cantave says. "We are begging the international community for support." (Another organization, the Lambi Fund of Haiti, which is allied to Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize-winner Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement, has plans to plant one million trees.)

Haiti, despite the meagre streaks of green across its topography, is important internationally for its unique biodiversity: it is a potential source of medicinal plants and a key resting and feeding place for migrating birds, Cantave says. For example, Canada's black-throated blue warbler, which breeds in southeastern Canada but winters in the Caribbean, stops in Haiti's Parc National La Visite, a 2,000-hectare oasis. (Haiti's national parks include Sources Puantes, at 10 hectares; Sources Chaudes, 20 hectares; Forêt des Pins, 30,000 hectares; Sources Cerisier, 10 hectares; and Fort Jacques et Alexandre, which is only nine hectares.)

Some support has been forthcoming. The German international-cooperation enterprise Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit recently donated about \$800,000 to the Fondation Seguin for a special project to plant 120,000 fruit, evergreen, and spice trees, as well as pasture grass to retain the soil. Cantave says the project is married to economic and infrastructure development for surrounding subsistence farmers to encourage them to support reforestation efforts.

Is Haiti doomed to be a country of no hope? Many, it would seem, despair that Haiti's political, economic, social, and ecological wrongs will keep it in a state of desperation that will never be overcome. Yet if history has proven anything, it is that human will is an unstoppable force. People like Stienen and Cantave, with their sense of moral outrage, are an inspiration to the rest of the world to show the will to help Haiti overcome the myriad of problems afflicting its beleaguered people. ♦

# PearlSmile

easyglamorouswhitesmiles

## Revitalize your faded smile in as little as 20 minutes.

### Book now.

Book an appointment at the following locations:  
Vancouver | Som Visao Spa 604-732-9901  
Burnaby | Surrey | Kamloops | Opening Soon

PearlSmile is state of the art L.E.D. teeth whitening technology.



## TREV DEELEY MOTORCYCLES

The Oldest Harley-Davidson® Motorcycle Retailer in Canada

1875 Boundary Road, Vancouver • OPEN 7 days-a-week

604.291.2453 • 1.866.510.2911 • trevdeeley.com

# FREE GIFT [ \$75 ]\*

With qualifying purchase. [ VALUE ]

\*while supplies last or until December 24, 2008 • some conditions apply

### CHARITY CALENDAR SIGNING EVENT

Meet the Calendar Girls Sat., Dec. 13, 2008 • Noon to 2:30 p.m.

Donations (\$20) for calendar to benefit the Vancouver Firefighters' Charitable Society.

MOTORCYCLE SALES | PARTS & SERVICE | MOTORCLOTHES® | MERCHANDISE | COLLECTIBLES | GIFTS