

## **Promises, promises**

*Donors pledge \$5.3 billion for Haiti and talk bravely of fixing more than earthquake damage.*

THE effort to rebuild Haiti after its devastating earthquake on January 12th will run into countless pitfalls, but it seems that a lack of financing will not be among them. At a donor conference held at the United Nations in New York on Wednesday March 31st, nearly 60 countries pledged a total of \$5.3 billion in aid over the next 18 months. Offers ranged from \$10,000 (from tiny Montenegro) to \$1.15 billion (from America). The total exceeds by 35% the Haitian government's request for the near term and represents more than half the country's expected economic output over that period. With promises made, the focus of reconstruction planning now shifts to converting these sums into improved conditions for survivors as quickly as possible.

Progress has been halting in the 11 weeks since the earthquake claimed some 220,000 lives and caused an estimated \$8 billion in damage. Haiti's fierce rainy season has begun, with some 700,000 people still packed into nearly 900 tent cities in Port-au-Prince, the capital. As many as 40,000 have clustered in high-risk areas, such as riverbeds, and many are reluctant to move. Concerns are growing about sanitation and contagious disease in the camps. Moreover, although the improvised settlements were initially peaceful thanks to a mix of solidarity and shell shock, they have grown increasingly dangerous as frustration sets in, with rapes becoming particularly prevalent.

At the conference Jean-Max Bellerive, Haiti's prime minister, outlined the government's plan to tackle these problems. Over the next six months the priorities will be providing decent temporary shelter for the displaced, and getting police and schools operating again as normal. The latter, he said, will require \$350m in direct transfers to the treasury. For the following year he outlined an aggressive agenda, including efforts to improve hurricane preparedness, launch infrastructure projects outside the capital, increase farmers' productivity, attract investment in textiles, secure supplies of clean water and more.

Such initiatives are sound, even if many are designed to deal with problems that had plagued Haiti long before the earthquake struck. In an attempt to spend aid more efficiently and transparently than in the past, a fund held by the World Bank will administer the money and an interim commission co-chaired by Bill Clinton will oversee reconstruction projects. Every country offering at least \$100m in aid within two years or \$200m in debt relief will be given voting power.

However, the Haitian parliament has not yet approved these mechanisms. And no decision has yet been made about how much money will be channelled through the government, which was weak and corrupt before the quake and reportedly lost a quarter of its employees in the catastrophe. Although there is broad consensus among donors that the state must be strengthened, some participants see that as a long-term goal that should not be allowed to delay reconstruction.

The Haitian public will probably be given the chance to weigh in on the relief efforts. According to Edmond Mulet, the UN special representative to the country, both legislative and presidential elections will be held at some point in 2010. (President René Préal, having already served two terms, will not run again). The parliament will also be kept busy by a proposed constitutional amendment to allow dual citizenship. The bill's proponents hope it will entice skilled members of the Haitian diaspora to return home.

At the conference participants unanimously spoke of rebuilding efforts as a chance to fix many of the problems that have affected the country for decades. Mr Préal advocates founding a

"new Haiti." Yet despite the generous pledges of aid, history suggests expectations may need to be tempered. "Haiti has never come back from a crisis stronger," says Dan Erikson of the Inter-American Dialogue, a think-tank. "It's always come back worse. Hoping that this earthquake can be a real opportunity for the country is an extremely ambitious dream, and it's betting against the odds."

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