

September 24, 2008

My "Haiti Relief" Visit Synopsis

I arrived Monday afternoon to the usual Rotary VIP Treatment given by Haitien Rotarians. Claude, Caleb, Ted, Guy and team of local Club representatives. We went up to the VIP lounge as someone had my passport stamped, we had a brief Press Conference and we were on our way to the Montana Hotel.

For those of you familiar with the roads in Port au Prince, Petion-Ville and Delmas know that it's a rough 40 minute ride. They are using heavy duty 4 wheel drives for transport because in my estimation the roads are too rough for Donkeys!

I got a brief debriefing from Caleb Lucien, Claude Surena, Ted Lazzare, Yves Martial and Guy Theodore before dinner. We had a nice dinner at the Montana Hotel restaurant with The Haiti Task Force Team, Claude our Haitienn Disaster Chair and the Petion-Ville and Port au Prince club presidents. Unfortunately ADG Robert Leger was not in attendance as he was doing some relief work in Les Cayes and was setting up for Tuesday's visit and press conference in Les Cayes. The discussions centred on the following:

- Review of fund and asset donations
- Confirmation of distribution to date
- Identification of the extent of the distribution
 - Where exactly
 - What exactly
 - How exactly

This proved very rewarding in that it confirmed my highest expectations of the integrity and commitment of the local Haitien Rotarians. The funds and goods went quickly and quietly to the most needy in the most needy communities as identified by the Local Rotary Clubs of Haiti in partnership with the Red Cross, Governmental officials, local NGO's and community leaders. Many I met over the next 2 days said that this was truly Haiti Relief because it went to every community not just the media targeted locations. Haitians from many communities got the relief.

This was followed by a lively discussion about where and how future funds and goods should be distributed and what the changing priorities looked like in the different areas. This is significant because for the first 3 weeks we were providing food and water,

sheltering and providing the necessities of life. While those needs still exist in certain communities today, there is also a need now to get back into the "living a life" mode. Schools were shut down after the Disaster and are scheduled to start up October 6th. In communities where possible, provisions and initiatives need to be made in that direction now. Sustainable agriculture needs to be addressed now. The goats, chickens, avocado trees, vegetable gardens etc were washed away or are gone now and they were the livelihood and sustenance before. We need to make provisions for this type relief. Our Haiti team is well aware of this changing priority within their community and because they are represented in each of the communities they are changing with the needs. It seems to be working extremely well.

Tuesday morning we began with a press conference and discussed Rotaries role. I began by giving DG Rupert's Thanks, prayers and blessing to those that were doing such extraordinary work. I also thanked them on behalf of Rotary International, IPRID Barry and RID Eric and the Rotarians of D-7020, Rotarians from Zones 33 and 34. We covered basically the same things as the previous day such as, how we got the support, where it came from, how it was distributed and direction we were moving. A great emphasis was put on the distribution to ALL the communities of the relief. The press conference was chaired by Claude with comments by myself and Haiti Task Force Chair Guy. Caleb translated for me.

Immediately afterwards, we drove / flew down the same trail to get back to the airport to catch our MAF (Mission Aviation Fellowship) charter. On arrival and after getting over the SHOCK of the public weigh in, we left. Pilot Michael is a missionary Pilot from Kentucky who is down flying as a missionary. 3 years in, 6 months off. A wonderful individual!

We 1st went to Cabaret and saw the Shelter Boxes set up. This was a very rewarding sight. I had been in contact from the start of the initiative and to see it go from sourcing through out fellow Rotarians, to shipping of 224 units from the supply stockpile in Panama by charter to Port au Prince. Then there was the arrival of the Shelter Boxes in Port au Prince and the amazing access and efficiency set up through Rotary. Through a Rotarian, Shelter Box Rotarian Representatives and team were called on the phone and told the charter flight was on final approach into the airport and to go to customs to meet the goods. They did so and through our Task Force Team and our Disaster Chair Claude they were cleared immediately. They then went on to distribution and set up. To see the completed initiative was great. I have copied one picture of the set up in Cabaret and one in Gonaives for you. There are more that I will make available.

Travelling up the coast to Saint Marc one could see the total devastation at every point the rivers reached the sea. Geographically Haiti is made up of many hills and mountains. Wherever the runoff from these hills and mountains meets the sea is the ideal location for a community one would think. Not after three major storms in a two week period. Every single community along the that coast has been disrupted from the massive flooding. It would begin by washing out the bridge and isolating the community and the communities further up the coast and would finish off by washing out the homes and farms in the valley.

The Saint Marc area has many small communities still totally isolated and being supplied by airlift and hovercraft done by the US Marines. There are also helicopter drops by other agencies such as the UN. We are planning a drop through MAF assisted by Rotarians in the next day to a particular community.

I was horrified to find that Gonaives is still under more than 3 to 4 feet of water and mud. The airport itself yesterday had over 3 feet of water still on the runway. The devastation there is indescribable and the total recovery of that area in my estimation will never be possible. The Government of Haiti needs to relocate the community. How one does that when so much of the community is made up of squatters and poor people who have no resources of their own and no where else to go I do not know. If relief ever comes to the extent that life can be lived there again, it is only 1 storm away from the same thing all over again. Tragedy beyond belief for the people there. Pray for them.

Most of the media coverage and subsequently relief effort is in that area. Proudly sitting at the base of one of the hills in one of the non-flooded areas was the Shelter Box Camp. A beautiful, encouraging and rewarding site. You can see in the picture not only the Shelter Boxes but food and clothing relief vehicles distributing supplies to the residence.

I was very excited during the Gonaives fly over to see two groups of Flamingos. There appeared to be 10's of thousands of them. The Pilot and Caleb had never seen so many. It was a mass of pink. After Ike hit the Southern Bahamas we were told that possibly up to half our 300,000 population of Flamingos was missing. Guess what guys. I know where they are. I don't know how to get them back though.

We left Gonaives area and flew to Les Cayes. We flew over La Gonav and into the valleys of Nippes and Aquin on our way to Les Cayes. Beautiful rolling hills with small farms on every gully and hill. There appeared to be little or no visible damage in most areas. Goats pigs and chicken in and around the small shacks, Sugar Cane mills still standing etc. One unusual sight was to see what appeared to be a large river bed that had washed

through a road and the middle of a community, and then quietly ended in farm fields. This was not a tributary, just a massive rush of water that became a river for a few days, played havoc in a community and did its damage and then went away like it was never there. That told me volumes about the amount of water that was poured over the country.

As usual we had a royal Rotary welcome in the Les Cayes airport, where most members of the Les Cayes club showed up to meet us. We quickly went onto a slum site in the middle of town where the small community "Lan Banan" was devastated by the flooding water of the storm. There were approximately ??? families there living in conditions we can not even imagine before the storm. During the storm a neighbouring flooding river found a field and their little community and used it as its drain. They clung to the rooves and hung onto walls as the water passed through the area. After it was over, what very little they had was gone. The Rotary Club of Les Cayes was there to feed them immediately and after assisting with feeding and sheltering has moved onto the next step which was to give them enough money to buy necessities, such as baby formula, diapers, sanitary needs etc. The money was distributed to the women only and done in a specific location where a signature or fingerprint was received by each recipient. Outstanding organization and planning by ADG Robert and the Rotary Club of Les Cayes.

Immediately following the site visit we went to the Les Cayes Rotary Club lunch. There we enjoyed a few moments of fellowship, discussed the issues in the area affecting the Les Cayes, Aquin, Jacmel and Jeremie Rotary Clubs.

The restaurant we were at was displaying Haitian Art as a fund raiser, Every item of art was donated and cost 4000 Goude \$100 US. The funds from them were going to disaster relief. I purchased 3 pieces and will put them in the silent auction at the Zone Institute in Nassau next month. I will ask Director Eric if the additional proceeds can be given to our Disaster relief initiative as well.

We held another press conference and we were back to the airport and back to Port Au Prince. It was a quiet and solemn trip back after the a long day of painful sights. It was a moment for me to reflect with pride on the opportunity the Rotarians of D-7020 have given me and the support fellow Rotarians have given us in Haiti because of the great work our local Rotarians do there.

On arrival in Port Au Prince I paid for the charter, but also donated \$525.00 US from the Fund to MAF because of all of that they have done for Rotary and will continue to do such as the air drop to Saint Marc.

After another wild ride to the Montana Task Force Chair Guy Theodore and myself met with Nadege Beauvil to discuss the creation of the Rotary NGO in Haiti. She is our consultant on this process. The meeting was very fruitful and we expect to have the status by the end of the year. She is providing us with an outline of the scope of work necessary and the time frames and cost for us to approve by the end of this week.

I then had the opportunity to join the Petion-Ville Rotary Club for dinner. We had had a torrential rainfall during our Task Force meeting and at that time a code red warning was issued on the radio which I presume is the equivalent of a flood watch so the meeting was smaller than usual. Claude Serena made a presentation on the Shelter box distribution and Wayne Robertson and John Mackie of Shelter Box were in attendance. It was very gratifying to hear their thoughts on the process. As Wayne said, "this was not my first rodeo". Wayne and John expected the usual difficulties and challenges that they face in these relief efforts. They were prepared for the worst given the perception Haiti. They were both emphatic that the Rotarians in Haiti were some of the best they had ever encountered and the response and assistance they received was some of the best ever. Congratulations Haitien Rotarians!

After a short night and a dash to the airport in the morning I returned to Nassau through Miami. A very busy and emotional 2 days, but every minute of the visit had me glowing with pride.

PDG Dick