

For Hackett, CRS veteran leader, rebuilding Haiti is an unprecedented challenge

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - During the past 40 years - from his first engagement as a Peace Corps volunteer to his three decades spanning the globe with Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services - Ken Hackett has witnessed and responded to human misery.

At 63, Hackett, who will retire as CRS president by the end of this year, smiles and laughs a lot and tells captivating stories. As a straight-shooting realist, he has dedicated his life to the calculus of pain and suffering.

But Hackett, a parishioner of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland, has never seen anything like this.

As Haiti marked the first anniversary Jan. 12 of the magnitude 7 earthquake that claimed 230,000 lives, displaced more than 1 million people and buried the economy of the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere beneath another layer of intractable debt, Hackett said the enormity of the rebuilding task dwarfs anything in his experience.

“In terms of challenge, this rivals anything that I’ve seen in 40 years and probably supersedes it,” Hackett said before an anniversary Mass celebrated Jan. 12 by Cardinal Robert Sarah, president of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, the Vatican’s humanitarian relief agency, outside the ruins of Port-au-Prince’s national cathedral. “This is really complicated.”

The complexity of solving Haiti's rebuilding crisis revolves around three major challenges, Hackett said.

"The biggest challenge is getting the government to allocate land in a reasonable location so that property can be reconstructed," he said. "The second biggest challenge is basically removing the rubble.

"And the third biggest challenge is peace, stability and, hopefully, finding someone with a leadership vision that is going to benefit the country."

That leadership piece is especially fraught with uncertainty, given the disputed results of the Nov. 28 presidential election in which a governing-party candidate, Jude Celestin, appeared to have made the runoff election despite low popular support.

Supporters of the popular third-place candidate, carnival singer Michel "Sweet Micky" Martelly, cried foul because he was eliminated from the runoff. Former first lady Mirlande Manigat finished first. A report on the election by the Organization of American States alleges widespread fraud.

"You had a government prior to the earthquake that was reasonably dysfunctional, inept and somewhat corrupt - not pervasively, but there were elements of it," Hackett said. "Then you had the earthquake and, sadly, a number of government workers died. That had to do with the fact that the earthquake hit just before 5 p.m. and they were still in their offices."

Governmental red tape has affected the CRS rebuilding plan. Six days after the earthquake, the agency received a contract from the U.S. government to rebuild homes. It has completed about 1,300 small, sturdy homes thus far, each capable of housing five to six people. CRS wants to complete 8,000 homes by the end of 2011.

The construction projects have been especially challenging because of land title issues and the difficulty removing massive amounts of rubble.

CRS also made the tactical decision to work with families in rebuilding homes rather than dictate where and how they should be rebuilt because, Hackett said, that provides a true partnership.

As for the rubble, CRS is providing hand-cranked crushing machines that can pulverize concrete and turn it into reusable foundation material. CRS will buy back the material from the families, and the families can sell rebar retrieved from the concrete on the secondary market.

“People can use that material as the foundation on their new homes,” Hackett said.

“We provide the basic frame of the home. It’s not big, but it’s a wooden frame. We provide the design and the roofing, but they have to do the work. Then they can add anything they want to the home. So, they have to participate in the rubble removal,” he said.

Hackett said it is important for CRS to work with families rather than, for example, bringing in bulldozers and building tract housing.

“This is intentional on our part,” Hackett said. “We made the decision that we’re not going to make all the decisions for the Haitians. We could have brought in big, giant concrete removal equipment and bulldozed and then rebuilt. But we said, ‘No, they’ve got to be involved in their own future.’ If they’re not, they’re going to sit and wait for somebody to do it.”

The cholera epidemic has claimed 3,760 lives and affected nearly 200,000 people since mid-October, and CRS has gone throughout the country to educate and train Haitians about proper hand-washing procedures.

Hackett said the Haitian earthquake, which devastated a highly populated, poverty-stricken urban area, was far different than the Asian tsunami in 2004, which affected fishing villages along the coasts of Indonesia and Sri Lanka but did not greatly impact any major urban areas.

That's why solving the Haitian crisis has been so difficult.

"People are feeling very angry, very frustrated, very let down," Hackett said. "They're angry at everybody - their government, the international community, the nongovernmentals, anybody who they feel should be doing more for them."

Scattershot rebuilding efforts by outsiders are well meaning, Hackett said, but they wind up "appeasing a Haitian group that should be trying to take control of the situation in a more substantial way. Forty years of sitting back and waiting for somebody else to do it sets a bad precedent."