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Braun: Haiti continues to struggle one year after devastating earthquake

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HECTOR RETAMAL/AFP/Getty Images

A man missing a leg walks through the remains of the Notre Dame Cathedral on Jan 12 in Port-au-Prince at the one year anniversary of the massive earthquake that devastated the island country.

WASHINGTON — Time to talk about Haiti again. A year has passed since the earthquake and, when events like an anniversary occur, people remember and talk. This is what can be said about Haiti now:

"I wish I could be more optimistic," says Sr. Mary Finnick, a nun and nurse with New Jersey roots who runs a retreat house in Port-au-Prince and, in the hours after the earthquake, established a tent city on her property that offered medical care.

Still, a year after the earthquake, Haiti remains a disaster. But Haiti was a disaster before the earthquake. So much so that some believed in a grotesque way that the catastrophe

might be a good thing because the entire country would be reconstructed.

It doesn't work that way. People died. The earthquake killed more than 200,000 people in one day and destroyed about half the private homes in and near its capital. Then Haiti faced a hurricane and a cholera epidemic that killed 4,000 more—some in just two hours after they got sick.

And meeting an emergency in a poor country is not like dealing with one here. So, some \$2 billion in American money alone has been spent on what happened and the meter has barely moved away from Jan. 12. Or, as a state department official put it at an anniversary Washington conference on Haiti, most it was spent on the immediate emergency. "Reconstruction won't hit its stride until 18 months" after the catastrophe.

That's after nearly a million children already have been vaccinated, a million tents erected, and 2 million cubic meters of rubble have been removed from the streets, said Russell Porter, head of the USAID — the US Agency for International Development.

"The emergency relief is the expensive part," said Russell at a conference hosted by New Jersey Rep. Albio Sires (D-13th Dist.), a member of a committee on the Western Hemisphere. It was sponsored by Oxfam America, a private relief agency.

Meeting the emergency was tried while Haiti barely had a functioning government — 27 of its 28 ministry buildings collapsed and thousands of government employees were killed. Florence Guillaume, a Haitian health official, told Sires' conference that, "We didn't know what we were doing" for days after the earthquake.

That's a measure of the disaster that can't be counted in dead bodies or tons of rubble. Chaos, and confusion. At another national conference on Haiti Wednesday, this one sponsored by the American Medical Association, a doctor talked about how well-intentioned volunteers, many of them Americans, made things worse. He called them SUVs—"spontaneous unsolicited volunteers."



"You'd be surprised at the number of doctors, medical students and other volunteers who not only got in the way but who also became casualties," said Daniel Edney, medical director of Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief.

Unintended consequences. Like so many relief organizations coming to Haiti that they took away talented Haitians who should have been working for the government. Thomas Adams, the state department's special coordinator for Haiti, told the Sires' led conference that, "The government of Haiti is competing with NGOs for talent — the government has been terribly demoralized."

The calamity was just too big, the country just too poor. Jordan Taperro of the Centers for Disease Control reminded the AMA conference that most Haitians didn't see a doctor before the earthquake—and that more than half live on a dollar a day or less.

Finnick, still in Haiti, says the talk about all the aid is frustrating to Haitians who don't see much of it.

"All one needs to do is drive through the areas hardest hit to realize so little rubble has been removed," she said. "It is no wonder so many are still in tents because buildings and homes are still piled high with rubble."

She said some buildings, declared unsafe by the government, have been given a fresh coat of paint—to hide government warnings stenciled on the walls — and opened as apartments and businesses. "Disasters waiting to happen," she says.

Yet optimism is important. How do you give up?. The only thing worse than having to spend billions just to get to a point where reconstruction can begin is not trying at all. So that's why Sires talked at the conference about "celebrating the resilience of the Haitian people," people who shouldn't be abandoned.