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SBDR medical teams treating quake victims in Haiti

By Mickey Noah

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (BP) – Six state Southern Baptist Disaster Relief (SBDR) medical teams are among the first Baptists to minister in Haiti since the deadly earthquake first hit the poor nation on Jan. 12 -- killing 200,000, injuring 250,000, leaving a million Haitians homeless, and turning some 350,000 children into instant orphans. Haiti was already home to about 400,000 orphans before the quake.

Baptist medical units from Arkansas and North Carolina have already come and gone, and fresh Kentucky and Mississippi teams arrived on Monday (Feb. 1). Florida and South Carolina medical units are due to arrive in Port-Au-Prince on Wednesday, Feb. 3.

The Kentucky and Mississippi groups wasted no time after arriving on Monday, turning a small library into a pharmacy and treating 550 patients. The Mississippi team is operating a small hospital out of a Haitian Baptist church located on the edge of one of Port-Au-Prince's larger tent cities directly across from the National Capitol building. The Kentucky team is working at another clinic near the Presidential Palace.

North American Mission Board disaster relief consultant Terry Henderson and a team of six will leave Atlanta on Thursday, Feb. 4, to serve as an incident command team in Haiti. They will link up with Fritz Wilson and Dennis Wilbanks of the Florida Baptist Convention, who are on the ground in Haiti for the second time since the earthquake.

Henderson and his group will be busy planning the logistics, lodging, transportation, feeding and communications for SBDR's eventual "D Day" – the day dozens of Southern Baptist disaster relief teams from the state conventions begin to be deployed to Haiti, a process that will extend over many months.

The Arkansas medical team was the first to land in Point-Au-Prince, ministering from Jan. 19 – just one week following the 7.0 quake – until Jan. 23.

Veteran disaster relief workers Tamara Gore and Jerry Gay were two of the 10 members of the Arkansas unit. Nothing prepared them for their first drive through downtown Port-Au-Prince. The unmistakable smell of death was pungent and everywhere -- bearable only by using their shirts as masks to cover their noses.

Haiti was in only its seventh day following the devastating earthquake. More than 100,000 bodies had already been recovered, and most had been buried in mass graves to stave off disease. The temperature was in the mid-80s.

"I was in the first car," recalls Gore, normally a law enforcement chaplain from Benton, Ark. "You could see the bodies. We would pass a collapsed building and you would smell the bodies. Everybody knew what it was without talking about it."

Gay, associate missionary for the North Pulaski Baptist Association in Sherwood, Ark., thought he had seen it all after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

"I've never seen anything even close to this disaster, even Katrina," says Gay. "My wife and I both worked after Katrina. It was bad but this was a different kind of bad. This was sudden with no warning. At least there was some warning for Katrina."

Gay said the worst memory for him was riding in downtown Port-Au-Prince one afternoon. Spotting the rubble of a flattened building and trying to stomach the accompanying stench, Gay asked his driver what the structure had been. The driver told him the building had been a school.

"Immediately, I thought of my little granddaughter back in Arkansas," he said. "I thought I was ready for what I would see, but my mind raced to my granddaughter before I could stop it. That's the kind of thing people who come down here need to be prepared for."

As the additional SBDR medical teams, the incident command team and general volunteers arrive in the Haitian capital in the days and weeks to come, Gay advises them to know what they're going for and why before they get there.



Medical personnel tend to a patient at a hospital outside of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Four SBDR medical teams from Arkansas, North Carolina, Kentucky and Mississippi have treated earthquake victims so far. Fresh medical teams from South Carolina and Florida are due to arrive in Port-Au-Prince on Wednesday, Feb. 3.



The Arkansas Southern Baptist medical team, which treated Haiti's earthquake victims from Jan. 19-23. Front row: Dr. Deborah Quade and Angela Titus. Second row: Jerry Gay, Dennis Culbert (Florida Baptist Convention), Emily Magnusson, Rebecca Brown, Tamara Gore. Third row: Joseph Gaston (Florida Baptist Convention), Carl Garvin, Larry Gore, Dr. John Redman and Katherine Durham.

"The mission ought to be clear," Gay said. "Folks need to be mentally, emotionally and spiritually prepared."

Gore says it another way. "I would tell disaster relief people that they need to be prayed up before they get there, because they don't know what they're going into and what they're going to be dealing with," said the 51-year-old chaplain with 28 years of experience.

Gore said the Arkansas medical team – two physicians, a physical therapist, one medic, five nurses and Gay, the unit's communications expert – flew directly into Port-Au-Prince via Mission Flights International (MFI) on Jan. 19. They set up a clinic at El Shaddai Baptist Church on the northern outskirts of Port-Au-Prince, near the airport and right across from the U.N. compound.

During their four-day stint, the med team would see around 70 patients a day at the makeshift clinic, including children from the El Shaddai Orphanage where they stayed at night.

The two physicians – one a pediatrician, the other a surgeon and pediatric urologist – treated patients for broken bones, cuts, abrasions, depression and stress-induced gastro-intestinal problems. They also saw patients who had to be transported to other medical sites because of the more serious nature of their injuries.

The clinic had no electricity. Team members slept on air mattresses on the floor. Gore said sleep was difficult at best because of the tropical heat and the nightly crowing roosters and bleating goats and sheep. Gay had the only cell phone that worked. Otherwise, communications was possible only by satellite phones.

Until the Arkansas team departed Haiti on Jan. 23, its biggest concern was running out of the precious antibiotics, pain medicines, bandages, snacks and other supplies they needed to treat the Haitians. Because of weight restrictions on the MFI plane, the team had brought only two large, black bags of medical supplies.

But here's where both Gore and Gay tell a remarkably consistent story – the story of just one of the miracles in Haiti so far.

"The first night there, we were afraid of running out of supplies," said Gore. "So when I gave the devotional that night, I talked about the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000 with the loaves and fishes. I talked about how we needed to pray for God to bless what we had, show us how to distribute what we had, and that God would give us what we needed."

Unbeknownst to the rest of the team, the two physicians and the physical therapist circled the two medical bags of supplies that same night, and also prayed that the supplies would be sufficient, according to Gay.

After two days and seeing 180 Haitian patients, Gore and Gay both insist that the two bags – neither of them cram-packed even upon arrival – were still full at the end of the second day. They said the same was true of a large sack of peanuts, cheese snacks and pretzels donated to the team by Southwest Airlines. Two days later, the bag had more snacks than they started with.

"People can draw their own conclusions," said Gay. "We're not crazy people, we're professional people. We carried in two bags of supplies. The bags were full but not bulging. When we got ready to leave, it was all a couple of us men could do to zip up the bags. Nobody came in and gave us any additional supplies or snacks. We left two full bags for the next medical team coming in.

"All we could do is look at each other and laugh – knowing that it had to have been God who had multiplied that stuff," said Gay.

Gay and Gore both said they are already making plans to return to Haiti.

In addition to Gay and Gore, the other eight members of the Arkansas medical team were Dr. Deborah Quade, Angela Titus, Emily Magnusson, Rebecca Brown, Carl Garvin, Larry Gore, Dr. John Redman and Katherine Durham.

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