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Haitians migrate from capital to provinces to try to make new start

By Trenton Daniel, McClatchy Newspapers

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SAINT MARC, Haiti — Marie Annette Agelus, her infant niece and 80-year-old grandfather were among the first to get off the yellow school bus after it pulled into this dusty port city.

Sixty miles away in Port-au-Prince, they left behind their home, which had crumbled in last week's earthquake. Fleeing to Saint Marc, Agelus said, was one way to start anew.

"There's no food, there's no water, and there's no place to sleep," Agelus said about quake-ravaged Port-au-Prince as she cradled and rocked her niece. "I'd rather take my chances here."

Agelus and her family were among the exodus from this country's overcrowded capital since the Jan. 12 earthquake crushed thousands of homes, killing an estimated 200,000 and displacing 1.5 million people. Haitian officials say some 200,000 people have left the city since the quake struck. The wave of migration to the provinces is only likely to grow in coming days as the Haitian government begins to implement a plan to house tens of thousands in camps.

The demographic change reverses a decades-long trend in which "moun andeyo" — Haitians from the countryside — decamped in the capital for a shot at finding work in a country where employment, formal or otherwise, has long been elusive. And it was this mass migration that prompted the province's residents to christen the capital the Republic

of Port-au-Prince, underscoring the divide between perceived city slickers and those in the rural areas.

The quake turned everything upside down. Government officials now say that food must be distributed and jobs created in the provinces to prevent many who fled from returning to the capital.

Though cities such as Saint Marc didn't suffer the massive devastation seen in cities like Port-au-Prince and others in the south, they are all being affected as they become new homes for those seeking shelter.

In Saint Marc, a city whose busy port is favored because of its proximity to Port-au-Prince but without the capital city's red tape, residents say they welcome the new arrivals, but many expressed caution, doubting that the hospitals and schools could accommodate them.

"We don't have the capacity. We don't have the logistical capacity," said Baunars Charles, the mayor of Saint Marc. "We don't have the financial capacity."

Charles said his city of 60,000 had received 40,000 people since the quake.

Some residents say they worry about the new residents, many of whom arrive with nothing. And some fear crime. In interviews, many mentioned the penitentiary in downtown Port-au-Prince, where prisoners escaped during the quake.

Police officers concede they lack the manpower, weapons and equipment to handle any newcomers intent on committing crimes. The United Nations' mission in Haiti recently estimated that 50 percent of the national police force's infrastructure and gear were destroyed.

"The police just can't handle the situation," said Officer Paul Blavette, 37.

Perhaps no place in Saint Marc shows the personal aftershocks of the earthquake more than St. Nicolas Hospital. A doctor said some 400 patients are in need of treatment.

In the room with Julien, dozens of other patients rested on stretchers and mattresses. Doctors and nurses zigged and zagged to move from one patient to the other.

"Yesterday, we were overloaded — that's a big word — very busy," said Carol Atkinson, a Gainesville, Fla., volunteer who came with a missionary group.

Atkinson said she saw crowds of people walking along the major roads on her drive into Saint Marc. She also saw the injured being pushed along in wheelbarrows.

Meanwhile, volunteers like Atkinson and the hospital staff try to cope with the influx of new arrivals and a dearth of doctors, medical supplies and medicine.

"It may not be a comfortable place, but we do the best we can," Dr. Yveto Mayette said.

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