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Baptists plan quick aid
in post-invasion Haiti

By Mary E. Speidel

Baptist Press
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RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--While the world awaits a U.S. invasion of Haiti, Southern Baptists are planning relief projects to ease the pain of suffering Haitians.

The projects -- a joint effort of the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission and Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board -- likely will send at least 150 U.S. volunteers to Haiti. First they'll distribute food to hungry Haitians. Additional teams may work in medical care, water well repair, water purification and construction.

"As soon as some action takes place -- whether it's an invasion or military leaders decide to leave -- we want to go in," said Ronald Wilson, who directs Foreign Mission Board work in the Caribbean.

Initially, a team of Southern Baptists will travel to Haiti to assess needs, Wilson said. The group will include missionaries who left Haiti just before a ban on U.S. commercial flights there took effect June 25.

They are career missionaries Mark and Peggy Rutledge, from Murfreesboro, Tenn., and Glendale, Calif., respectively; International Service Corps workers Ed and Mary Brentham, from Belton, Texas; and journeyman Todd Lowe, from Central, S.C.

Other team members likely will include leaders from the Brotherhood Commission, based in Memphis, Tenn.; the Foreign Mission Board, based in Richmond, Va.; and some state Baptist conventions experienced in relief projects, Wilson said.

The assessment team will determine what needs Southern Baptist volunteers can best meet in Haiti. "We'll seek to meet the most immediate needs," said Wilson. That probably will be hunger relief.

"The information coming out of Haiti says that the food crisis is becoming worse and worse," said Mark Rutledge, who has been monitoring the situation while staying temporarily in Hollywood, Fla.

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David Heady, a Southern Baptist from Owensboro, Ky., confirmed that report in a phone interview Sept. 16 from his home outside Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital. Heady serves in Haiti through Global Outreach, a mission agency in Tupelo, Miss. He directs a conference center, feeding programs, medical clinics and water projects.

"Yesterday in our clinics, three-fourths of the babies we examined were in states of severe malnutrition," said Heady. "We had a 4-year-old in last week who weighed 16 pounds and a 3-year-old yesterday who weighed 12 pounds. The embargo has had a devastating effect on the public."

American Baptist missionary Charles Chapman, who left Haiti in June, has heard similar reports from Haitian Baptists and missionary colleagues still working there.

"They're holding up under very difficult circumstances," Chapman said of Haitian Baptists. "They're seeing in their churches a lot more people hungry and ill and many more funerals, not from violence from the military but just from the economic situation."

Based on such reports, Southern Baptist relief planners expect volunteers first will work in food distribution for about seven weeks.

"We hope to go in so quickly that we can provide food for people from right after the invasion until (other humanitarian groups) get going," Rutledge said. Later, the food project would be turned over to Haitian Baptists and volunteer efforts would shift to other areas of need.

The Brotherhood Commission will enlist qualified Southern Baptist volunteers for the relief projects.

"We'll contact those state conventions who have well-trained volunteers for the work in the early stages," said Russell Griffin, the Brotherhood's assistant vice president. "Then we'll broaden the appeal for other volunteers."

Qualified Southern Baptists who want to volunteer for these projects should call the Brotherhood Commission at (800) 280-1891 or (901) 722-3787. Financial contributions for the Haiti project may be sent to the human needs department of the Foreign Mission Board, P.O. Box 6767, Richmond, VA 23230-0765, or to the Brotherhood Commission, 1548 Poplar Ave., Memphis, TN 38104.

Wilson anticipates the Foreign Mission Board will contribute "a very sizable amount" of money to the project, but exact figures have not been determined. The mission board also expects to donate several water purification units to help provide clean water for Haitians.

Since Foreign Mission Board workers left in June, Haitian Baptists have continued to operate an agricultural program funded by Southern Baptists. The Rutledges and Lowe work with that program. The Brenthams lead a water well project also supported by Southern Baptists. That project was put on hold last year because of operational problems caused by economic sanctions against Haiti. Until leaving Haiti they led evangelistic crusades in churches.

Heady led an evangelistic campaign in his area Sept. 4-11 while Haitians braced themselves for a possible war with the United States. More than 250 Haitians accepted Christ as Savior.

"We witnessed one of the greatest outpourings of the Holy Spirit I've seen in my 11 years of ministry in Haiti," he said.

"We need the world to pray for Haiti. It's no doubt the most critical hour in the history of this country. We're terribly concerned about the possible loss of life on both sides."

