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## Coordination critical to Haiti relief effort

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From the food drive at a Miami magnet school to drop-off points in Palm Beach County, everybody seems eager to help Haiti. Soaring food costs there have triggered riots and spawned further worries that a much more serious food crisis is imminent.

International relief agencies and Haiti experts warn that the uncoordinated flow of aid can be counterproductive in a country where food is plentiful on store shelves but most people can't afford it because of high unemployment and global price hikes. Delays getting food out of the port before it rots also have been a recurring problem.

"People are very generous, but it's just best to let them demonstrate that generosity by giving money to the professionals," said Ron Waldman, a professor in public health at Columbia University in New York, referring to the many international nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, already trying to respond to the crisis in Haiti with their own food distribution efforts. "What they need is money."

Still, for some people the idea of walking into a grocery store and then delivering the bags is more satisfying than writing a check. Others worry that giving money doesn't always reach the needy.

About three dozen Miami-Dade County officials and activists on Friday outlined a plan to address the crisis, from pressing for immigration reform for Haitians to debt relief from the Bush administration, to figuring out how best to feed people.

"It's just one small thing that's happening," said Amy Carswell, program officer for the Miami-Dade Community Relations Board, which helped organize the emergency summit. "One thing we're looking at is, how do we get food to the people who need it the most, immediately, without it being subject to graft or sitting in the port?"

The U.S. Southern Command in South Miami-Dade County is working on that, said Col. Bill Costello, SouthCom's chief public affairs. For instance, several staffers are working to help the Pan American Development Foundation move 18, 40-foot containers of rice from the Midwest to Port-au-Prince. Staffers are also helping a kids organization ship 500,000 high-nutrition meals to the Caribbean nation.

### HIP-HOP STAR HELPS

Haiti-born hip-hop star Wyclef Jean is getting involved, too.

His Yéle Haiti organization has teamed up with the World Food Program of the United Nations, which recently renewed calls to support its Haiti operations. So far, WFP has received only 24 percent of the \$96 million needed to help 1.7 million people in Haiti. That was barely enough to support work through April.

But it's the smaller-scale, local efforts that have some asking whether they are practical, and wondering if they will reach those who need it most.

"I think it's commendable that people are having this reaction to Haitians being hungry," said Leonie Hermantin, deputy director of Lambi Fund, a Haiti nonprofit that works with peasant groups in the countryside. "But the question is, how do you address hunger? Do you send food? Or do you send money to organizations with the capacity and infrastructure to deliver not just to cities but to remote areas where people are starving?"

Earlier this year, a number of aid organizations in Haiti complained that food donated to the island nation was rotting in containers, unable to clear customs weeks and even months after arriving.

Munir Mourra, a Haiti-born shipping vessel owner who has complained about new Haitian customs procedures, worries about those rules will affect groups trying to send supplies, especially now.

Shippers must contend with mountains of paperwork and stricter rules.

"What's going to happen at the end of the line, when it gets to Haiti, I can't tell you," said Mourra, who donated a 40-foot container parked at Notre Dame d'Haiti Catholic Church in Miami's Little Haiti awaiting donations.

Alix Boyer, an official with Haiti's Ministry of Social Affairs, says the best way to avoid problems is to contact his office in advance, or to coordinate with a reputable organization already there.

## **MONEY NEEDED**

Meanwhile, international relief workers stress they can use monetary donations to buy food in Haiti, which helps stimulate the country's local economy.

"This way we're able to make sure the food gets in the right hands and this helps generate income," said Lisa Torres, area director for World Vision.

Those who want to help Haiti say it will take more than the threat of holdups at the port to discourage them. Among the efforts:

Stephanie Giraldo, a junior at Coral Reef Senior High, is spearheading a food drive and handing over the collected goods to Food For The Poor, a Christian international aid organization headquartered in Coconut Creek, which is conducting its own drive.

Riviera Beach Mayor and Pastor Thomas Masters recently launched a countywide food drive in Palm Beach County after returning from Haiti with the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

He has a drop-off point at City Hall and another location and is asking for rice, wheat and other staples. He said he plans to distribute the goods himself in Cité Soleil, a teeming slum in Port-au-Prince.

Former Haiti Consul General Guy Victor is leading a group of concerned members of the Haitian diaspora in Miami-Dade and Broward. Calling the project SOS for Haitians, they have set up drop-off points at businesses and churches. The collection will be shipped to northwest Haiti via the port city of Gonaives.

Meanwhile, a report about Haitian mothers mixing clay dirt to make mud cookies -- a tradition in some sectors of the society -- has inspired one nonprofit in Haiti to create its own edible version of mud cookies.

With the photo of a boy sticking out his tongue, a pitch on the website reads: ``Eat Dirt Cookies So He Won't Have To."

While observers welcome the good deeds, they urge do-gooders to look beyond short-term remedies.

"The long-term solution is that people have to support institutions in Haiti -- especially ones working to improve agriculture production, food security and the environment," Hermantin said.