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HUMANITARIAN IMPULSE ALIVE

Houstonians react to Haitians' plight

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Brett Coomer Chronicle

Volunteers sort through donated clothing at the Multi Ethnic Community Center on Wednesday.

As images of Haiti's destruction flooded the media, Houstonians on Wednesday began work to ease the suffering of the island's residents, tens of thousands of whom likely perished in Tuesday's earthquake. They solicited money, assembled medical teams, gathered food and blankets — and they prayed.

For many, the relief efforts took on added urgency as they agonized over the safety of family, friends and colleagues who were in or near Port-au-Prince, the nation's capital, when the magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck.

"If you had called me two hours ago, you would have found me crying," said J. Sadraque Cius, an

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emergency volunteer at the Multi Ethnic Community Center. The native of Haiti had learned from a relative that his sister's house was flattened; the woman's fate unknown.

Operating from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., the community center at 9819 Bissonnet collected non-perishable food, bottled water, tents, sleeping bags, flashlights and even electrical generators.

Houston's First Baptist Church raised money to support relief operations of the Southern Baptist Convention. But on a local level it began making arrangements to fly a team of physicians to Haiti and to rebuild the home of a church member's mother that was destroyed in the quake. A statewide organization, Texas Baptist Men, plans to send up to 9,000 water filtration units to the island.

Haitian Multicultural Association President Marie Baptiste said her group assembled a team of nurses and other medical personnel. The Houston chapter of the American Red Cross is supporting the national group's plans to send money, search and rescue teams and supplies to the island.

Catholic Cardinal Daniel Cardinal DiNardo called for special collections for Haitian relief during weekend masses throughout the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese.

"May our Haitian brothers and sisters who grieve and experience intolerable suffering find peace

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in the arms of our compassionate God," he said.

Robert Jensen, CEO of Kenyon International Emergency Services, said the Houston-based company is preparing plans for a relief mission.

Jensen, who spent time in Haiti in the 1990s, said the impoverished nation's pre-earthquake deficiencies in clean water, adequate food, reliable electrical service and medical care will complicate relief efforts.

"There's an incredible urge to just send people," he said. "But a person who goes down needs life support — a place to sleep, a way to eat and dispose of waste. All that was in critical short supply before the earthquake. Another challenge is managing resources. ... Do you send three bulldozers or 3,000 tents?"

Paul Ferguson, who was in Haiti two years ago on behalf of the Conroe-based religious relief organization Restoration Global Ministries, worries that relief workers will find Haiti "a war zone with no one to help ... a massive death."

"We will do anything we can do," to aid Haitians, he said.

Restoration Global President Ken Vitgood said staffers and Southwest Houston Rotary volunteers who arrived in Haiti one hour before the earthquake to participate in a water well-drilling project are safe.

Concerns remain, however, for an orphanage the group operates in Grand Goave. That facility cares for 70 children, Vitgood said, and provides education for even more. Vitgood also had no word on the fate of a hospital his organization helps support.

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