

Help Hindered by Customs Regulations

One of Haiti's biggest obstacles to recovery has been its own governmental red tape, which has often slowed down foreign aid. New customs regulations enacted last spring made bringing supplies into Haiti costly and complicated. The high price of getting items through customs and approved for distribution – along with donations getting bottlenecked or pilfered and then sold on the black market – forced many relief groups to put their shipping plans on hold.

For Friend Ships Unlimited, however, it didn't matter. The Lake Charles, ministry, which owns a fleet of retired Navy vessels donated by the U.S. government, sent six shiploads of supplies into Haiti over the six months following the disaster.

"The customs issues were very disappointing," says Sondra Tipton, who along with her husband, Don, started the global humanitarian relief organization more than 25 years ago. "We had to check the expiration dates on all medical supplies. That means we spent a lot of time and energy rechecking items because customs wouldn't let them in, and that caused some delays."

New laws required even bandages and topical ointments to be within the expiration date to get into the country. Nonetheless, Tipton says Friend Ships will continue shipping to Haiti as critical needs arise.

The ministry recently partnered with Lutheran Church-affiliated Global Missions to send two 40-foot containers loaded with 60,000 pounds of rice and building materials to orphanages.

Bob Johnson, a doctor and founder of Missions of Love in

Hartford, Ky., says his medical relief ministry has shipped 30-gallon drums to Haiti about once a month since the disaster at a cost of \$35 per barrel, but he adds that the price is rapidly rising.

"It's happening with all missions – nobody can get anything in because it all boils down to shipping costs," Johnson says. "I'm hopeful all of that will change after the election."

Citizens and relief workers alike hope the country's presidential and legislative elections last November usher in a new Haiti and a foreseeable end to many of the nation's ongoing problems. Yet in the meantime, relief agencies continue to face the dilemma of meeting the immediate needs around them with limited and often insufficient supplies.

David Canther, founder and president of ACTS World Relief, a Christ-centered disaster response organization out of Fort Pierce, Fla., says the United Nations and the United States raised \$11 billion in aid but that "none of that is being given out until after the elections. Food still is not coming, and children are starving just as bad as before and immediately following the earthquake. Orphans can't get off the ground. Tents are turning paper thin from being baked in the heat or damaged from the heavy rains."