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BET entrepreneur Johnson collaborates to rebuild Haiti

RLJ Cos. and partners to open factories for housing materials

by C. Benjamin Ford | Staff Writer

Robert L. Johnson, entrepreneur and founder of Black Entertainment Television, said he is investing his time and experience to help Haiti rebuild and to help spur economic development in the earthquake-devastated island nation.

"It is a huge challenge [to rebuild], but having said that, you have to take into account the leadership of Haiti and the spirit of the Haitian people," Johnson said.

Johnson's RLJ Cos. of Bethesda has joined with Global Building Solutions of Charleston, S.C., cruise ship line Royal Caribbean and investment company WIN Group of Haiti to provide building materials to help with home construction so that displaced earthquake victims can move from tents to permanent structures.

The factories to manufacture the materials could be in operation six or seven months after they are approved by the Haiti Reconstruction Commission, Johnson said in a telephone interview Tuesday. He declined to disclose specific figures for the project.

The factories will build insulated panels for earthquake-resistant homes that will cost less than \$10,000 each, according to a statement from RLJ, an investment company whose portfolio includes Urban Trust Bank of Orlando, Fla.

Royal Caribbean has provided emergency assistance since the earthquake and will build a model school as part of the partnership with Johnson's company and GBS, said Richard Fain, Royal Caribbean's chairman and CEO, in an e-mailed statement.

The school will be built using local labor, Fain said.

The country's devastation, particularly in the capital of Port-au-Prince, is so severe that rebuilding has been delayed nearly six months after the quake killed an estimated 230,000 people and left an estimated 1 million homeless.



Photo by Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Joshua Kelsey
Members of Fairfax County (Va.) Urban Search and Rescue conduct a rescue operation in a collapsed section of the Hotel Montana in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, following January's earthquake.



Johnson recently toured Haiti and said there are many challenges because so much infrastructure was destroyed that it makes it difficult for businesses to operate there.

Haiti is not the first ravaged nation that Johnson has tried to help. RLJ worked with Global Building Solutions in Liberia to help rebuild after that country's civil war. The work by Johnson's venture there employed 900 Liberians directly and provided work for 37 subcontractors.

While many think of Haiti as impoverished before the Jan. 12 earthquake, the country's gross domestic product grew upward of 3.5 percent in 2009, Johnson said.

The work in Haiti by Johnson, who became a billionaire when he sold BET, goes beyond a business investment, he said. He intends to help the country start over, to rebuild its infrastructure and housing and move people from the crowded, earthquake-prone capital to the surrounding country.

One of his goals "is to let the business community know on a global level that Haiti is open for business," Johnson said.

"The Haitian people are committed to coming back from this disaster," he said.

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