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## 'Cannot imagine Haiti could suffer even more'

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

The Jan. 12 news that a 7.0 earthquake had hit Haiti near the capital city of Port au Prince held a special poignancy for me because I had just finished writing a story for NCR about an October trip I took to Haiti's northern section and the Dominican Republic.

It would have been difficult to imagine anything getting worse in the poorest country in the hemisphere, where very little works, where 80 percent of the population lives in poverty, where a series of tropical storms battered portions of the country in 2008 and where chaos, violence and political instability are everyday fare. And in an instant things got much worse.

The trip in October was sponsored and planned by Catholic Relief Services, which has worked in Haiti for 55 years. It's one of CRS's largest operations and includes dozens of international staff and more than 200 Haitians. John Rivera, director of communications for CRS in Baltimore, said Jan. 12 that all of the staff in Haiti appeared to be safe.

Karel Zelenka, CRS country representative in Haiti who has had experience bringing relief to war zones and areas affected by natural disasters, sent a communiqué calling the earthquake 'a disaster of the century,' adding, 'we should be prepared for thousands and thousands of dead and injured.'

Experts say that an earthquake of this magnitude would cause significant damage in most places. It is reasonable, then, to expect the effect to be multiplied in a place like Haiti where there is negligible infrastructure, poor communications and where building standards are lax, if not non-existent.

'We have a terrible problem with communications - only incoming calls,' wrote Zelenka. 'We tried to organize this morning and contact UN, OFDA and Caritas. We might be running out of supplies ourselves - water and food. No organized rescue efforts yet - all done by individuals with bare hands. Damage

incredible all around, but our offices seem fine. Some major buildings are gone ? the hotel Montana, the National Palace etc.

All (American Airlines) flights canceled until this weekend. UN has only 4 helicopters, two were seen early this morning doing surveys, otherwise no movement of any rescue vehicles / people. Most in a shock. ?On radio stations only wild music. People have been screaming and praying all over the place throughout the night. It is a disaster of the century, we should be prepared for thousands and thousands of dead and injured.?

Sr. Rita Larivee, former publisher of NCR who now is General Superior of the Sisters of St. Anne, an order based in Montreal, was awaiting word Wednesday morning about the status of more than 50 members of the religious order based in Haiti, most in Port au Prince.

She said she had received no communication from any of the sisters, about 20 of whom (including six novices) live in a motherhouse located on steep hillside overlooking the capital city and within a mile or two of the National Palace, which collapsed in the quake. I had stayed at the house during a trip in May 2008, when I spent about 10 days in the country researching a story on Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Martha Vanrompay and her work rescuing restavek children, youngsters caught up in a system that amounts to domestic slavery.

Larivee said she had been in communication with international aid groups such as Oxfam, who said many of the roads, including the one to the motherhouse, were impassable immediately after the quake. Other sisters are located to the south of Port au Prince in the town of Les Cayes, along the Caribbean Sea, where significant aftershocks were felt, she said.

Larivee said she knew one of the order's schools, attended by 1,000 students, had collapsed, but was unsure of the fate of another school, accommodating 1,700 students. She also was awaiting word about other houses occupied by Sisters of St. Anne throughout Port au Prince.

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