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Protecting Haiti's children

by Judy Gross



A child waits for a meal to be distributed by the U.N. World Food Program in a makeshift camp in Jacmel, Haiti, Jan. 28. (CNS photo)

New Analysis

Shortly after an earthquake devastated Haiti Jan. 12, the Miami, Fla., archdiocese offered to set up operation "Pierre Pan," a program to resettle Haitian children in the United States, modeled after a similar "Pedro Pan" program in the 1960s that found homes for some 14,000 Cuban children.

The day after he floated the idea of Pierre Pan, even Randolph McGrorty, executive director of Catholic Charities Legal Services in Miami, admitted that it is too soon to focus on relocation and adoption. Haiti's immediate needs must take precedence, McGrorty told the Sun-Sentinel newspaper Jan. 19.

A later statement by the Migration and Refugee Services of the U. S. Catholic bishops' conference retracted the offer, however, and made it clear that the safety of children and family reunification are primary before bringing children here for adoption.

The arrest over the weekend of members of an Idaho church group for trying to take a busload of Haitian children out of the country -- ostensibly to rescue them -- shows what happens when good intentions meet an international disaster in a world sensitized to the possible exploitation of children.

Americans have opened their wallets and their hearts since the poorest nation in the western hemisphere was devastated by an earthquake Jan. 12. Media images generate a flood of sympathy.

Saddest of all are images of precious, wide-eyed children played across the media. Children orphaned or separated from family result in thousands of Americans rushing to rescue the tiny victims of the disaster, many even volunteering to adopt these children. After any media story, registered adoption sites like Rainbowkids.com and www.lifetimeadoption.com, receive heart-rending pleas from earnest would-be parents.

The pressure for quick adoptions were compounded by parallel media stories showing orphans air-lifted to this country, which transmitted false hope to those wanting to adopt.

In the immediate aftermath of the quake, the U.S. State Department and the Haitian government cut red tape to facilitate the speedy adoption of Haitian children. Approximately 500 Haitian orphans were brought to the United States under this humanitarian plan. What the media coverage can miss, or the viewer not recognize is that these children were already in the adoption pipeline and the adopting families had been approved for adoption long before the quake hit.

The Haitian government has halted all adoptions at the present time.

The truth is that earthquake or not, adoptions take a long time. Years. Background checks, evaluations for financial solvency and home visits all move along at a snail's pace before prospective parents are approved.

The Haitian government insists the first step is to identify children, a daunting task for toddlers who may not know their names or where they lived. Next is an attempt to locate their parents or other family members and reunite the family. Only when all else fails will children be designated adoptable. Even then prospective parents should expect a two to four year process before bringing the child home.

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A Jan. 25 memo from the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services clarified the position the church has on the situation of Haitian unaccompanied children. The statement reinforces the priority of tracing down family members and returning children to their families in Haiti or in the United States. If no family or guardian is found, Haitian children should be brought into the United States and placed in the care of the Department of Health & Human Services.

Deacon Marcus Hepburn, a Florida Catholic Conference Emergency Management Specialist, urges patience and caution when dealing with displaced children.

?After the tsunami in Indonesia, children were airlifted by the thousands before attempts were made to unite them with their families. Months later parents were still looking for their children only to learn they were in other countries,? Hepburn said.

If and when an unaccompanied child is transported to Florida, the Catholic organization Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center Children's Legal Project represents them.

Since its founding by Humility of Mary Sr. Catherine Cassidy and Sacred Heart of Mary Sr. Maureen Kelleher, the organization has represented unaccompanied immigrant children in federal custody, including some of the Haitian children who have recently arrived. Too often before the Haitian disaster, children, some as young as six years old, arriving on Florida's shore, even with an adult, were placed in a detention center. Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center is working to prevent this from happening now.

Even before the quake, there were an estimated 200,000 orphans in Haiti. Now as many as a million children may be without parents.

According to Hepburn, rural, impoverished Haitian families placed their children in city orphanages where they expected them to be fed and educated.

?To a Haitian, a child, given to an orphanage because a family simply t can?t care for him, is referred to as an ?orphan.? So ?orphan? may not mean a child without parents.?

With the entire system now in disarray, children are vulnerable to being taken by human traffickers and sold into the sex trade or slavery.

A State Department report on trafficking notes that up to 300,000 Haitians, ages six to 14, were trafficked in 2008. Many were forced to work as domestic servants in Haiti as well as overseas. The report also notes a ?sharp increase? in the number of Haitian children trafficked for the sex trade.

In a Jan. 28 news briefing Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Philip Crowley said trafficking of children in the aftermath of the earthquake is a serious concern. He said the State Department is working with UNICEF and the Haitian government to alert civilian aid organizations to be ?on the lookout for traffickers who might want to try to take advantage of the situation.?

The problem isn?t a new one for Haiti. Crowley continued, ?The Haitian police have had child protection brigades in place for some time. Obviously, we?re working with them, but also to try to supplement the capability on the ground."

Crowley said they are also concerned that pedophiles may be among the emergency volunteers flocking to Haiti. "We?ve seen a couple of cases of those in recent days. So this is just something that we?re working collectively with those organizations that are actively trying to help children and the people on the ground to be alert for this kind of danger,? Crowley said.

UNICEF, Catholic Relief Services and many other aid organizations have set up safe spaces for children in camps for displaced persons.

Catholic Relief Services has operated in Haiti for 55 years. It supports Maison Arc en Ciel (Rainbow House) orphanage and Maison d?enfants Par la Far in Port au Prince.

[Judy Gross writes from Tallahassee, Fla.]

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