

In Haiti, it's a 'critical time' to save lives, foster healing

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 2, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

Editor's Note: Bishop Gumbleton is in Haiti this week with Johanna Berrigan, a member of the House of Grace Catholic Worker in Philadelphia, Penn. Instead of a homily, below is a letter the two sent describing their trip and the situation in the struggling nation.

Dear Friends,

As you know, the situation in Haiti is grave. There are still 1.3 million people living outside in camps throughout Port au Prince. There is, unfortunately, nothing of significance to report regarding any real progress being made towards recovery, reconstruction and rebuilding. The Haitian people have continued to endure unimaginable difficulties.

We are writing to let you know that we returned to Haiti on Saturday, Nov. 27. We plan to do follow up work with our Haiti health care project, Kay Lasante, in Ti Paz Kazo. Since our last visit in August, our health care team and board members in Haiti have secured a building to rent for the next year.

We are very pleased about the progress that is being made. The building has been deemed safe, and is ideal for our purposes. The staff has been working in the building since Oct. 12th. We are delighted to be going to Haiti to see the property, and to assist with moving the project forward in any way that we can. There are still many things that have to be addressed and dealt with: electricity, access to water, securing necessary equipment and supplies.

It is a critical time in Haiti. It is crucial that we be there to support our staff who, along with so many throughout the country, is facing the challenge of saving lives.

As you are aware, a cholera epidemic is spreading throughout the country. The following is information from the International Society for Infectious Diseases: The cholera outbreak suddenly appeared in small communities along the Artibonite River, 60 miles north of the capital Port-au-Prince, on Oct. 21, 2010. Its origin has not been determined with certainty but the popular belief is that the disease arrived with infected UN soldiers from Nepal. They were stationed in a rural base near the river where the outbreak first started. Cholera is endemic in Nepal whereas Haiti has not had a recorded cholera case in the last 50 years.

The latest assessment published Nov. 22 by the Ministry of Public health and Population reported 23,377 hospitalizations since the beginning of the epidemic and 1,344 deaths.

In Port-au-Prince and the surrounding area, 1,618 hospitalizations have been reported since the first case in this area and 77 deaths.

Despite the differing opinions on how cholera entered Haiti, the fact is that the lack of sanitation, clean water, weather changes, and lack of access to immediate treatment have all conspired to create this crisis. The centers for disease control and prevention and the Pan American Health organization report that the epidemic in Haiti

could easily get worse despite efforts to control it. It is believed that Haiti will have to deal with and treat cholera for many years.

It is with deep gratitude that we share with you that because of your support, we have been able to send money so that Dr. Joey and our team of health care agents could purchase necessary medicines, IV fluids, and supplies in order to treat the victims of cholera. We have also been able to provide them with educational materials to distribute throughout the community on the prevention and treatment of cholera.

We plan to take more medicines, supplies, IV fluids, water purification tablets, and educational materials with us.

We are very pleased that we will be joined on this delegation by two registered Nurses, Sr. Anne McCarthy and Maire St. Ledger. They will join with Johanna, Dr. Joey and the team in Haiti to work at the Kay Lasante clinic and do health education seminars in various communities. In addition to the Kay Lasante Clinic, we plan to see and treat people at the camp for the disabled and elderly in Cite Soleil.

In addition to many other visits with various friends and co-workers in Haiti, we plan to visit the Pax Christi soccer club run by our friend and co-worker, Daniel Tillias.

We will also be joined by Philadelphia Artist, Lily Yeh. Lily will be doing healing art projects with children and adults in the camps and at Kay Lasante. Our Haitian co-workers are most eager to have Lily come and train other Haitian artists in trauma healing art work.

Nov 28 is Election Day in Haiti. At this critical time in Haiti's history, it is an extraordinarily important election. The future of the country rests heavily on the next Administration. For various reasons, voter turnout is expected to be low. What remains very disturbing and unjust is the fact that there is no representative of the Fanmi Lavalas party, the party of the majority of the people in Haiti -- the poor.

As is always the case, what is most near and dear to our hearts is simply to be with people of Haiti, especially at this time. Two of our staff members have lost loved ones in the past week. It seems that there is no end to the suffering and grief visited upon them.

We ask for your prayers for the people Haiti and for us as we journey to be with them during yet another challenging and painful time.

We are grateful for all that you have done and continue to do.

Peace,
Johanna Berrigan, House of Grace Catholic Worker
Bishop Tom Gumbleton

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