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The Long Road to Recovery

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The Long Road to

Boat people. HIV/AIDS. Hurricanes. Earthquakes.

Haiti has the unfortunate plight of appearing in the news only in connection with these kinds of bleak topics. Having recently lived in Haiti for seven months, I find it difficult to reconcile the images I see in the news with the images of Haiti I hold in my mind.

I do not wish to say that the poverty, disease and despair do not exist. They do. They are an inescapable part of life in Haiti. But they are just that — a part.

For the whole picture, you must see children walking to school arm in arm, wearing neatly pressed uniforms. You must taste the sweetness of a mango fresh from the branch. You must listen to a hundred voices raised in song beneath the brilliant stars of a Haitian night sky.

Only by seeing the whole picture can you understand the value of the unique culture that the Haitian people are now fighting to preserve.

The effects of the January earthquake in Haiti are staggering. First, there is the physical damage. Shortly after the event, my friend Vivian Tortora, who helps manage a guesthouse in Port-au-Prince, wrote, “I have no idea how this country is going to pick itself up from the rubble. The literal rubble. Everywhere. It is as if this place were bombed.”

Beyond the physical damage, the quake inflicted psychological trauma on millions of Haitians. Many who survived witnessed the mangling of human bodies, including those of their friends and family. They now live in constant fear of another earthquake and face the loss of their homes and livelihoods.

Vivian’s descriptions offer a glimpse into life in Port-au-Prince: “We are all sleeping outside due to many aftershocks, 54 of which were 5.0 or higher. . . . We are operating a field hospital in the adjacent soccer field as well as a tent city organized

by the neighborhood leaders. There are about 1,300 sleeping in the field and another field two houses away. Four surgeries were done on our kitchen table with minimum anesthesia, including an amputation.”

Finally, there is the damage to the collective Haitian spirit caused by the destruction of their capital city, which was home to about 25 percent of the nation’s population and served as its political and economic center. For comparison, the 15 most populated cities in the United States account for only about 10 percent of the population.

The collapsed National Palace, the ruined hospitals and the flattened schools are images that will not soon leave the minds of the Haitian people. Imagine the simultaneous destruction of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Washington, D.C., and you might begin to grasp the shock of the earthquake to the Haitian people’s sense of national identity.

The pain of the event was particularly acute for the millions of Haitians who have left their country for such places as the Dominican Republic, the United States, France and Canada. Members of the Haitian diaspora were subjected to days or even weeks of anguish while waiting to hear from their loved ones.

One of my Haitian friends, Michelet Jean-Charles, is a student at Saint Mary’s University in Winona, Minn. As the days slipped by after the earthquake with no word from Michelet’s wife or 12-year-old son, I began to lose hope. I could not watch the news without picturing his wife, Mireille, beneath every pile of tumbled concrete, or his son, Mikeson, lying bloody and helpless in an overtaxed medical camp.

I can only imagine how Michelet must have felt, wondering if his efforts to obtain an advanced education would now be meaningless in the face of the death of his wife and son. Finally, at the end of an anguished week, he received a phone call from Mireille and joyfully learned that she and Mikeson had escaped without physical harm.

Recovery

By Elizabeth Cooke

Between July 2008 and July 2009 I spent seven months in the coastal Haitian city of Gonaives, where I helped implement a reforestation and alternative fuels project with the support of a Compton Mentor Fellowship. As the only American living at a Haitian-founded mission, I developed close ties with my neighbors and co-workers.

These ties were strengthened by the communal experience of the 2008 hurricane season, which devastated Gonaives with massive floods and mudslides. Forced to evacuate my house through rising floodwaters, I joined my neighbors in an exodus to higher ground and spent the next two months living in a house shared among several Haitian families.

In the wake of the hurricanes, I observed the range of emotions that disaster can elicit, from distress to despondency to humor. Young women embraced each other in the streets and sobbed over the uncertainty of survival. Friends shrugged their shoulders and told jokes, like good-natured Jobs facing yet another trial. Old men pushed wheelbarrows of soggy rice through the muddy floodwaters to feed their children and grandchildren. Mothers collected the far-too-abundant rainwater in basins to wash their families' clothes, making the best of bad circumstances.

Although the 2010 earthquake was much greater in scale than the 2008 hurricanes, I suspect the reaction of the people has been similar. Contrary to the footage shown on television, I am sure most people did not turn to violence but rather to their greatest resource — strong networks of family and friends — to survive.

The earthquake and its aftermath highlight many thorny issues, such as poverty, international aid and international adoption. For example, the contrast between the earthquake in Haiti, which

Elizabeth Cooke was working in Haiti when the hurricanes of 2008 struck. Now, after yet another devastating national disaster, she offers insights into the resilience and collective spirit of the Haitian people.



caused more than 200,000 deaths, and the Chilean earthquake six weeks later, which caused fewer than 1,000 deaths despite its greater magnitude, underscores the role that poverty plays in exacerbating the effects of natural disasters.

The best solutions to poverty are far from evident. Many policy experts debate whether the foreign debt incurred by poor nations is merely a form of economic slavery, whether aid creates a demeaning and counterproductive cycle of dependence, and whether aid leads to cultural hegemony (as in Haitian children wearing clothing splashed with the names of American brands and sports teams).

While large-scale aid decisions are often removed from the hands



of individuals, adoption cases usually involve personal stories and connections. The concerns surrounding international adoption gained the limelight when a group of Idaho missionaries attempted to illegally transfer 33 children across the border from Haiti to the Dominican Republic.

However, the issue also encompasses the stories of more thoughtful individuals. For example, shortly after the earthquake, a woman in my current home of Bloomington, Ind., came to me for advice on international adoption. The woman and her husband, who had sponsored the education of a child in Haiti for two years, had learned that the boy and his brother were pulled from the rubble with their dead mother six days after the earthquake.

The couple is now wracked with concern for the boys while questioning whether the children would be better served to remain in their home country or be adopted. The question involves not only the importance of maintaining a child's cultural identity but also the awareness that adopting one or two children will not address the deeper problems within the country.

Despite the complicated implications of the disaster, I have no doubt that the Haitian people are determined to move forward and are looking to the rest of the world not to lead them, but to partner with them.

In a recent letter, one of my closest friends and mentors in Haiti, Pastor Michel Morisset, offered a compelling call for cooperation among the many non-governmental organizations in Haiti. He wrote, "Many good organizations start on a good foundation — interdenominational, nondenominational, interracial, cross-cultural — but then one drop of selfish interest or motivation drives us into a religion, and we start excluding."

Imagine my surprise to read these words, which sound like those of a religious skeptic instead of a passionate evangelical Haitian pastor. Yet on reflection, his words speak to the beauty of the Haitian spirit, which, like the Haitian Creole language, welcomes a diversity of ideas, customs and values.

The road to recovery in Haiti will be long, and the torturous road out of poverty even longer. However, when the images of toppled buildings, eroded mountain slopes and malnourished children seem too much to bear, I remember a Haitian proverb that celebrates persistence: "*Piti piti, zwazo fê nich.*" Little by little, the bird builds its nest. [F]

The author, a 2008 Furman graduate, is pursuing master's degrees in public affairs and environmental science at Indiana University. Visit her blog, www.imaginehaitian.org. Associated Press photos.