

Caritas bringing hope to Haiti



By Oscar Andrés Cardinal Rodríguez Maradiaga, S.D.B. President of Caritas Internationalis

Caritas Internationalis has been providing aid to survivors of the earthquake in Haiti.

Our priority in the first weeks of the crisis has been getting food and shelter to hundreds of thousands of people in need. A team from Caritas Internationalis has been coordinating relief efforts, led by Caritas Haiti, the Catholic Church in Haiti and other Caritas members.

In the midst of this tragedy, our hearts have been won by people from different countries working together as brothers and sisters to bring hope to the people of Haiti.

Haiti's worst earthquake in 200 years



A 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti at 16.53 local time on Tuesday 12 January. Its epicentre was near the town of Léogâne, 25km south-west of the capital Port-au-Prince. The quake caused extensive damage to Port-au-Prince, Jacmel, Léogâne, and other settlements.

Over three million people have been affected by the earthquake. By 27 January, 170,000 dead bodies had been counted and the final death toll is likely to exceed 200,000. Over 20,000 commercial buildings and 225,000 homes have been destroyed, 800,000 people are homeless and 340,000 people have fled the capital.

Hospitals, schools, government buildings, the United Nations compound, water pipes, electricity cables, communication lines, churches, roads, and the port were all badly damaged or destroyed in the earthquake.

Haiti is one of the world's poorest and least developed countries. At least 80 percent of the population live on less than \$US 2 a day. Over half do not have access to healthcare and are illiterate. A fifth of children are malnourished. Port-au-Prince has one of the worst slums in Latin America.

We have long warned that the lack of development in Haiti, its dire poverty, and its decaying infrastructure left it vulnerable to disasters. We are facing such an emergency now. The earthquake in Haiti has brought destruction and human suffering of an unprecedented scale.

Disaster ready

Caritas was in a good position to provide aid to survivors after the earthquake. Caritas Haiti has been working on emergencies, development and social justice for 35 years. It works through 10 diocesan offices, through staff, and parish priests and community volunteers.

In 2008, Caritas Haiti responded to a series of hurricanes providing food rations, cleaning up schools and homes, helping people build shelters, and providing scholarships to children so they could go to school.

Caritas Haiti is well supported on the ground by other Caritas members, with Catholic Relief Services (CRS is a Caritas member in the USA), Secours Catholique (Caritas France), Caritas Switzerland, Cordaid (Caritas Netherlands), and Caritas Spain having programmes there before the earthquake, and Caritas Dominican Republic being close by to offer assistance. CRS had a significant presence with an office of 300 people.

The Caritas and CRS offices and all our staff survived the quake.

First on the scene

It was good fortune that Caritas Haiti staff were outside the capital on the day of the earthquake, attending their annual planning meeting. When they returned to Port-au-Prince the next day, they immediately began to work. They carried out an initial assessment, began to hand out tents, provided some first aid to survivors, and they checked on loved ones and colleagues.



Caritas staff told us of terrible scenes with bodies everywhere, hospitals overwhelmed, and the streets filled up with people who had nowhere to go. The Cathedral of Port-au-Prince had collapsed. Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot, Vicar General Mons. Charles Benoit, and a number of clergy and religious had been killed.

Staff had to shift to working 18 hour days as well as mourning those they'd lost.

Telecommunications networks were down. Caritas Haiti President Bishop Pierre Dumas

went on national radio to urge for calm to help aid efforts.

At Caritas Internationalis headquarters in Rome, an emergency response team led by Humanitarian Director Alistair Dutton had been sent to Haiti. Other Caritas staff from members in the USA, Canada, Mexico, and Europe were also *en route* within 24 hours to provide extra capacity for staff on the ground.

Supplies that were supposed to help hurricane victims—water, food, plastic sheeting—were in a CRS warehouse in Les Cayes, a port on the southern coast that was relatively unscathed by the quake. The staff began loading up vehicles. Most of those supplies never made it to Port-au-Prince, but were handed out in towns like Léogâne, that had also been devastated by the quake.

Caritas Dominican Republic and CRS had a warehouse and volunteers across the border in Santo Domingo. Working 18 hour days, the Caritas volunteers had prepared enough food buckets to feed more than 5000 people and another 500 hygiene kits within the first 5 days of the earthquake. Once aid is ready, it is trucked over the border to Port-au-Prince.

Search and Rescue

Caritas Latin America and Caribbean Regional Coordinator Fr Antonio Sandoval put together a Search and Rescue team comprising the Cancun Mexico Rescue Brigade and the South African Relief Team, and flew with them to Haiti.



The team pulled survivors from the rubble and provided them with paramedic care. Working in unimaginable conditions, in collapsed buildings with aftershocks as large as 6.0 occurring daily, surrounded by dead bodies, they rescued hundreds of people.

The team focused on the area of the destroyed Cathedral, working with Caritas staff and local religious, who helped search through the debris. Caritas and religious medical workers set up a mobile medical centre nearby to help survivors and the wounded. They gave life-saving medical

treatments.

After a week, the team had started to give up hope of finding anyone else alive when they heard a voice under the wreckage. Our Caritas staff spoke of the small miracle of finding somebody still alive.

After a two hour operation, they pulled Enu Zizi, an elderly woman from the ruins of the Cathedral. She was injured, but OK. The first thing she said to her rescuers was “Je t’aime” (I love you).

The doctors, the Mexican and South African Search and Rescue teams, and the nuns who worked with Caritas deserve recognition for their bravery and generosity.

Medical help on the frontline

Haiti’s hospitals were badly damaged in the earthquake. No theatres for surgical procedures remained functioning in the capital. The hospitals that were operational were quickly overwhelmed by the disaster with dead and wounded.

Caritas had a track record of providing healthcare in Haiti, supporting some 200 medical centres. Caritas set up mobile health clinics to help respond to the emergency.

Seventy percent of St. François de Sales hospital collapsed in the aftermath of the quake. The paediatric ward collapsed on the maternity ward and some surgery units. Nobody knew how many were killed.

CRS organised a visit of a team of Belgian doctors and fire-fighters. The firemen dug into the rubble of the hospital and accessed the medical supply room. More medical supplies were found. Volunteer nurses and doctors from around the city started examining people in the courtyard. The remaining building that had not collapsed was cleaned and served as an operating room. An ambulance was found.



We have established three functioning operating rooms – conducting an average of 12 severe surgical cases per day – as well as a laboratory, X-Ray room and blood bank at the same hospital. A public health campaign has also been launched, carried out through megaphone, leaflets and radio.

The hospital is helping people like Sara. A 6-year-old with what seemed to be a left leg broken in multiple places. The quake buckled her house and she was trapped under it for a few hours. She was finally pulled out and now she has received treatment.

The focus is shifting to providing primary healthcare and helping people with chronic illness. This will be a huge challenge in a country where half the causes of death are attributed to AIDS, respiratory infections, meningitis, and diarrheal diseases.

Leading the response

Caritas Haiti and the Bishops of Haiti have been leading the Catholic Church's response to the crisis in Haiti. Caritas Internationalis set up its coordination crisis centre at the Caritas Haiti compound to ensure that all Caritas members worked effectively together under guidance of the national Church in Haiti.



We have been inspired by the leadership of the Church in Haiti. Caritas Haiti President Bishop Pierre Dumas has been a leading figure, despite grieving for two lost family members. He sent us a message on how the symbols that unified the country – the Cathedral, the Presidential palace, the schools, and homes – are destroyed. He told us we're now unified by the symbol of charity, solidarity and trust. We are all Haitians now.

providing them with purification tablets so they can treat water supplies or by installing water bladders.

Ronel Labauche's family is one of those living in temporary shelter that will now have regular access to water from a Caritas bladder that holds 15,000 litres of water and is refilled daily. It is enough to cater for 1000 people per day.

Looking forward

Carmen Charles had a job in a communications company, a nice house, even a woman to help with the housework once in a while. Now she lives with 14 other people in a tent fashioned from branches and old patterned sheets. She came to a Caritas run camp after the earthquake where she is receiving food, water, and other aid to get her through the next days and weeks. She is full of hope however. She told us that "Haiti will live again."



Experience has taught us that in crisis situations such as this, the weaker voices in society, already vulnerable to abuse, become more so – including women, children, the elderly and the infirm. We need to think beyond simply meeting basic needs – food will not keep communities safe from abuse and water will not protect them from violence.

Almost half of the affected population (48%) are children, many of whom are deeply traumatised and alone. As people continue to deal with the earthquake's devastating aftermath, it is imperative that we do not allow a situation of lawlessness to emerge where human rights abuses and crimes can be carried out without fear of consequences.

We need to ensure that the international humanitarian response not only provides life-saving food, water, health and shelter but also has measures in place to ensure that those most vulnerable among Haiti's survivors are protected from abuse, violence and exploitation.

Our homes are important for safety, protection and human dignity, and to sustain family and community life. Without them we are extremely vulnerable. Providing appropriate shelter is going to be a key concern.

Quick action is crucial. With the hurricane season in a few months time, we must ensure that those people now living in camps or makeshift shelters are not vulnerable to heavy rains and strong winds. We have no time to lose on rebuilding Haiti.

Caritas is thinking about a better future for Haiti. Caritas Haiti President Bishop Dumas already wants to see a more sensible housing plan for the country where so many people are not concentrated in one city.

One of the poorest nations in our world has been the focus of media attention and the

outpouring of humanitarian assistance as a result of this natural disaster. May this bring with it lasting solutions and commitment to alleviate the misery of Haitians and the structural poverty of this beleaguered nation.

Haiti will survive this earthquake.



At the funeral of the Archbishop Joseph Miot, Auxiliary Archbishop Joseph Lafontant told the crowd, “A lot of Haitians are asking, ‘Why did this happen?’ Many are even asking, ‘Why would God cause this?’ God wants to unite the people. It is a way to build a new Haiti. For anyone who has turned away from God, now is the time to return.”

We are strengthened by those words.

The international community must ensure that the resources are available to heal Haiti. The reconstruction must be led by the Haitians themselves. Only they can decide their future course. Too many times aid projects have failed because they have been imposed from outside. Caritas has learned this lesson and will be guided by the local knowledge of the Church and the people of Haiti in its actions.

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Thank you

The public support we have received is at the time of writing over US\$ 60 million.



That is a humbling reflection on the trust people put in Caritas and the Church to deliver humanitarian assistance. The money will be used to build a brighter Haiti, to build better schools hospitals, homes and lives for Haitians. But solidarity hasn't only been reflected in financial assistance. We have been receiving prayers and messages of support from all over the world.

long project. Caritas is a community response. It is the volunteers filling food buckets, the parish priests organizing distributions, and the many others. Our thoughts and prayers are with these communities in Haiti, but also our deep gratitude, as we all play our part.

The staff of Caritas Haiti and of Caritas Internationalis have already done a tremendous job in beginning what will be a



God of all creation, as we weep with our family in Haiti, console us.

In this time of crisis, open our eyes to look beyond the disaster to see Christ in our brothers and sisters in Haiti, as Christ sees us.

Be with all creation; strengthen us in solidarity with those living and working in Haiti.

All creation returns to you in mourning and your grace guides our efforts to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, comfort the grieving and stand for justice.

With your mercy, sustain us at this time as we continue to work for peace and justice.

Amen.

Photos by Michelle Hough, Conor O'Laughlin, and Katie Orlinsky

Learn more about Caritas response in Haiti at www.caritas.org



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