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George Rodr guez

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Thousands Remain Homeless in Haiti Eight Years After Devastating Earthquake

by George Rodríguez

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Tens of thousands of homeless people, living in displacement camps eight years after an earthquake devastated Haiti's capital are evidence of this Caribbean nation's critical reality ([NotiCen, May 20, 2010, Oct. 20, 2011, Jan. 10, 2013](#)).

The 7.0-magnitude natural event that hit shortly before 5 p.m. on Jan. 12, 2010, came to worsen the situation of the approximately 80% of Haitians caught in poverty—an estimated 25% of them in extreme poverty—and somehow surviving on less than US\$2 a day.

Poverty and marginalization are historic features of Haiti, a country recurrently battered by destructive natural events and constantly affected by political instability, corruption, and violence.

The earthquake destroyed ample areas in the capital, Port-au-Prince, and hit other sectors in the country, killing over 200,000 people, displacing some 600,000 others, and rendering yet another 1.5 million homeless.

According to the World Report issued early this year by Human Rights Watch, “as of September 2017, authorities had failed to assist many of the nearly 38,000 individuals still living in displacement camps ... in resettling or returning to their places of origin.”

In a detailed account it ran on the issue in January, the Associated Press (AP) focused on Camp Caradeux, located in the northern Port-au-Prince district of Delmas, which is one of the shelters housing thousands of Haitians displaced by the earthquake.

“Promises of new permanent homes have failed to materialize, and Haiti's economy remains weak, leaving camp residents with nowhere to go,” the AP reported. “The camp is transforming into a village as people build cinderblock homes and try to create more normal lives.”

According to Chery Dieu-Nalio, an AP photographer in Haiti who visited the camp, Caradeux has about 3,000 temporary shelters and tents and about 50 concrete houses, with 100 more under construction.

“There is a school, police station, church, and Voodoo temple, and the camp is supplied with electricity and potable water,” he said, noting that residents earn a living by “selling charcoal, cutting hair, and pursuing other jobs so they can slowly accumulate the money to build houses.”

Abuse of women is prevalent

Besides providing information regarding the people in the camps, in its latest report, Human Rights Watch also highlighted the situation of vulnerability that women and children are facing.

“Gender-based violence is a widespread problem,” the report said. “Haiti does not have specific legislation against domestic violence, sexual harassment, or other forms of violence targeted at women. Rape is only criminalized according to a 2005 ministerial decree.”

The report recalled that in March 2016, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women had urged Haiti to move on a draft law on violence against women, but the political crisis ongoing at the time—when legislative and presidential elections were postponed several times ([NotiCen, July 21, 2016](#), [Oct. 20, 2016](#), [Jan. 12, 2017](#))---“prevented progress towards consideration of the bill or a similarly pending criminal code reform that would address gaps in protection.”

According to the report, the destruction caused by a 2016 hurricane “has forced many people to migrate to Port-au-Prince, leaving women and children in temporary shelters and camps, where they are more vulnerable to abuse.”

Between 2004 and 2017, during the presence in Haiti of the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (UN Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti, MINUSTAH), women and girls were victims of sexual abuse by members of MINUSTAH military personnel, according to reports by victims and human rights organizations ([NotiCen, May 11, 2017](#)).

Girls at risk

Children, mainly girls, are particularly vulnerable, as they become targets of combined labor and sexual abuse.

Due to the massive spread of poverty, hundreds of thousands of children are exploited as domestic workers, known as *restavèks*, who perform household chores at wealthy homes and often are sexually abused in the process.

The Haitian Creole term derives from the French expression “rester avec” (“stay with”), and it describes the minors whose low-income families send to live with wealthier families, in principle so they can receive general care, including education, in exchange for carrying out light domestic tasks.

According to Human Rights Watch, “though difficult to calculate, some estimates suggest that between 225,000 and 300,000 children work as *restavèks*,” and contrary to what their families hope for, “are often unpaid, denied education, and physically or sexually abused.”

Haiti’s labor code does not set a minimum age for work in domestic services, although in 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child “called on Haiti to criminalize the practice of placing children in domestic service,” Human Rights Watch added.

A cycle of devastation

The 2010 earthquake was actually the start of a string of highly negative events—most of them natural—that the country has endured over the last eight years.

Only nine months later, a cholera epidemic broke—it is ongoing and has killed more than 10,000 people and affected more than 700,000. MINUSTAH Blue Helmets have been held responsible for the epidemic as well, the result of their having polluted one of the country’s main rivers ([NotiCen, Nov. 10, 2016](#)).

Strongly criticized because of the soldiers’ abusive conduct, the mostly military MINUSTAH was replaced last year by the Mission des Nations Unies pour l’Appui a la Justice en Haïti (UN Mission for Justice Support in Haiti, MINUJUSTH), mostly a police mission.

Six years after the earthquake, Haitians faced another catastrophe when Category-4 hurricane Matthew ripped through the country’s southwest in October 2016, claiming more than 1,000 lives,

displacing thousands of persons---who also remain at camps— and causing mayor damage to housing and road infrastructure as well as agriculture ([NotiCen, Nov. 10, 2016](#), and [Oct. 5, 2017](#)).

And more recently, Haiti was on the path of some the hurricanes that swept through the Caribbean in the summer of 2017, leaving a trail of massive destruction in several islands.

The earthquake's eighth anniversary had an added negative component. On the eve of the actual date, President Donald Trumps was quoted as questioning why the US accepts people from "shithole countries" such as Haiti and African nations instead of "people from places like Norway."

In a not-atypical reaction, Voodoo priest Brinor Monajeau told AP: "If I were the government officials, I'd shut down the US Embassy, because Trump doesn't respect my nation."

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