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Children Test Positive for STD in Haiti Orphanage

by George Rodríguez

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The fact that dozens of children at an orphanage tested positive to a sexually transmitted disease (STD) sounded the alarm in the US Senate, 10 of whose members have asked the US State Department to pressure the Haitian government into closing the place.

In a letter sent Jan. 29 to Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan, the senators also charged that children have been abused at the orphanage Notre Dame de la Nativité (Our Lady of the Nativity), located in Fontamara, on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, the country's capital.

The home, which was badly hit by the devastating January 2010 earthquake that killed close to 70 children there, has processed adoption requests mostly from US and French families, and according to the senators, has been under investigation for more than a year by the government agency focused on child protection, the Institut de Bien-Être Social et de Recherches (IBESR).

"While Haiti's social services agency has had an ongoing investigation into the orphanage for more than a year, nothing has been done to stop the abuse," the legislators wrote in their January letter.

Four days later, the Associated Press (AP) reported that IBESR official Andolphe Guillaume had shown one of its journalists a December 2017 report noting that at least six of 33 children tested at the orphanage had chlamydia and recommended further investigation.

"He said officials were surprised because the home had a good reputation. 'This crèche is one of the best in Haiti. We don't know how this happened,'" the AP reported.

Nativité director Eveline Louis-Jacques acknowledged the positive chlamydia tests, stating that there was no confirmation about the children having been infected at the orphanage itself, and denied that the children were being abused at the home.

The minors "are very well treated," Louis-Jacques said, adding that "they're not in an orphanage" but "in my house, with me."

Nativité is not the only orphanage reported as a place where minors are abused, as a British charity foundation and IBESR revealed in reports issued less than a year apart.

Illegitimate businesses

In June 2017, the London-based Lumos Foundation—founded by J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter novels—released a report warning that many Haitian orphanages were operating as illegal businesses, and noting that more than 80% of the estimated 30,000 minors living in such institutions are not orphans.

"More than 75% of the children could be reunited with their families with a little support," according to Lumos, which reported that "the costs to support children to live with their families are considerably lower than keeping them in orphanages."

The report added, "Well-intended donors and volunteers from the United States, Canada, and Europe support Haitian orphanages on a large scale. It is likely that tens of millions of dollars are sent to orphanages in Haiti every year, through numerous streams, including cash transactions, making it difficult to track the money."

However, the report said, "the availability of such funding, and the desire of well-intended people to help 'orphans' is driving the establishment of orphanages purely for profit. Only 15% are officially registered. The rest operate outside the law and therefore do not publish accounts or budgets. There is no official system to record children entering or leaving orphanages."

The report, titled "Orphanage entrepreneurs: The trafficking of Haiti's invisible children," said that "some orphanages in Haiti are established with the best of intentions and strive to provide adequate care," but added that evidence suggests that a trend has developed toward children trafficking.

"The evidence demonstrates a consistent pattern of behavior," Lumos said, adding that orphanages use "the children to persuade donors to give them money. The sums received are far in excess of the money spent on looking after children ... in many cases, children are neglected and abused in the orphanage."

Closing orphanages

Some children are disappearing or dying without record, Lumos said, and "criminal investigations and prosecutions of such cases are rare." Lumos said that with the help of government authorities, the organization was in the process of closing three orphanages from which children had been trafficked.

"A holistic, joined up plan is needed to remove all children from harmful orphanages and place them in safe, loving family environments, ensuring they are included in school and have access to healthcare and an adequate standard of living," Lumos said.

In February 2018, IBESR issued a report, *Annuaire des Maisons d'Enfants*, noting that over the past six years, it has closed down 160 orphanages.

"Not a month passes without several orphanages being shut down," IBESR said, adding that it "wages relentless combat against the appalling conditions" in such institutions.

Quoted in the report, IBESR Director Arielle Jeanty Villedrouin predicted that "150 to 200 other orphanages will have to be closed" between 2018 and 2020. By the end of the three-year period, she said, the operating children's homes will have to be "able to properly answer to the needs" of the children and function mostly as "transit centers and/or open centers."

IBESR also reported that it was monitoring Notre Dame de la Nativité as "a precautionary measure aimed at checking on an orphanage's management through the institute's appropriate services."

In this case, "it was brought to the institute's knowledge that some adopted infants are infected with chlamydia, a sexually transmitted disease," IBESR reported, adding that during initial inquiries, it was mentioned that "the disease could have been transmitted from a mother to her children."

IBESR officials decided to place the orphanage "under control," a measure that allows the government, "with its constant presence at the center, to protect the children" and "to further inquire" in order to "reach the fairest decisions," according to the report.

Lumos, for its part, reported that “orphanage ‘directors’ pay ‘child-finders’ to recruit children for the orphanage. In some instances, families are paid to give their children away. In others, they are deceived into believing their children will receive an education and have a better life.”

This pattern is similar to the thousands of *restavèk* cases, involving children whose impoverished parents entrust them to wealthy Haitian families as a means to guarantee better living conditions for the minors who, in exchange, perform household work ([NotiCen, Feb. 22, 2018](#)). But the children, mostly girls, work as unpaid child domestic workers (CDW), often in conditions of slavery.

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