

# WHEN DISASTER STRIKES: HAITI EARTHQUAKE

## A Humanitarian Emergency Response

### OVERVIEW

On the evening of 12 January 2010, the strongest earthquake to hit Haiti in more than 200 years struck just 17km south-west of Haiti's densely populated capital city, Port-au-Prince. The quake, measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale, lasted mere seconds, but the impacts will be felt for years to come.

**"We in Haiti thought it was the end of the world."**

*-Haitian President René Préval*

According to the Government of Haiti, the earthquake has led to the deaths of at least 212,000 people with 300,000 additional people injured. The city's hospitals, schools and two seaports were severely damaged. The airport was very slow at moving in goods with only one runway, and power outages and fuel shortages complicated relief efforts. With more than 1 million displaced Haitians, providing shelter, sanitation, food and water quickly became the most important focus for humanitarian personnel.

This sudden crisis has been made worse by Haiti's already critical situation. Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere with 80% of the population surviving on less than \$2 per day. For years the country has struggled with political and economic crises, high population density and decaying infrastructure. Before the earthquake, some 60% of Haitians lacked access to basic health care, and the country had the highest rates of infant, under-five and maternal mortality in the western hemisphere. The earthquake has only further complicated the challenges that Haitians continue to face.

**"What do you want most right now?"**

**"I want to go to school."**

**"Were you in school before the quake?"**

**"No. But I want to go now"**

**"Why?"**

**"Because my country is broke and I want to fix it."**

*Conversation with Marie-Ange, an 11-year-old in Champs de Mars, one of the largest temporary settlement sites in Port-au-Prince.*

Haiti's humanitarian emergency is also a children's emergency. With nearly 40% of the population under the age of 14, children have been severely impacted. The high death toll from the earthquake has left many children without the support of primary care-givers; leaving them vulnerable to abuse, neglect, malnutrition, disease and psycho-social trauma. And where only a little over half of primary school-aged children were enrolled in school before the quake, the devastation of as many as 5,000 schools will only slow the process of getting all of Haiti's children to school.

UNICEF makes children its number one priority. In the aftermath of the earthquake, UNICEF has been focused on delivering life-saving interventions to children and their families. Child survival programming has included distribution of safe water to nearly one million people, the installation of 850 latrines in Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas, hygiene baby kits distributed to child centres, shipments of therapeutic food, emergency health kits, tarpaulins for shelter and vaccinations (against measles, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough) for more than 500,000 children under seven.

Children need to be found, fed, and kept healthy and safe. Child protection programming involves activities that focus on ensuring the protection of children from abuse, neglect and the effects of trauma, while tracing of and reunification with families continues. UNICEF-supported child friendly spaces and centres have been established to provide psychosocial support and in some cases residential care for unaccompanied children. UNICEF continues to distribute child protection kits, containing blankets, sleeping mats, towels, t-shirts, shorts, toiletries and underwear with a goal of reaching 50,000 children.

During times of chaos and crisis, the routine of school provides children with a sense of safety and normality. UNICEF is working with the government of Haiti to broadcast back-to-school messages, as some of the schools in unaffected parts of the country are reopening. UNICEF Back-to-School programming in Haiti has involved the distribution of education materials in the form of tents, school-in-a-box kits and early childhood development kits for temporary schooling.

The road to recovery will be long and uncertain for Haiti, but there is cause for optimism. Though Haiti is broken now, there is the opportunity to build back *better* in the future.

**"It's not an exaggeration to say that 10 years of hard work awaits the world in Haiti."**

*-Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper*

Compiled on February 28, 2010.

## HAITI EARTHQUAKE STORY: FINDING THEIR FAMILY

Adapted from *Helping Haiti's Orphaned and Separated Children Find their Families* by Guy Hubbard

Rodrigue wipes away his tears and carries on talking. It's an amazing act of courage for the 12-year-old boy, who saw his parents die in the 12 January earthquake in Haiti. He's telling UNICEF aid workers how he lived through the earthquake and ended up alone.



To view a video on this story, visit [www.unicef.org/infobycountry/haiti\\_52642.htm](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/haiti_52642.htm)

"I was playing football outside with two of my friends," says Rodrigue, "and then I heard the earthquake and I felt the ground shaking. I ran back to my house and found it ruined, and my parents were dead."

UNICEF is working in more than 60 orphanages throughout Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince. Teams are helping children like Rodrigue who can't find their families after the quake.

Rodrigue has three older sisters. He thinks they are alive and wants to see them again. To help him and other children, UNICEF and its partners have to work hard to find not only their parents but other family members, too.

While helping families find one another sometimes seems a very difficult task, there have been happy endings.

Sindy, 11, was reunited with her mother and father at their home in rural Haiti after being separated from relatives with whom she was living in the capital, Port-au-Prince. Sindy had left her family home in a rural area to attend school in Port-au-Prince. She lived with her aunt and uncle but couldn't find them after the quake. Hurt and alone, she made her way to a hospital.

When her parents learned of the quake the next day, they rushed to the capital to find their daughter. "But when we couldn't find her, I was upset, I didn't know what to do," explains Sindy's father.


The hospital contacted UNICEF, which found her uncle and then her parents, and the family was together again. For Sindy, the relief was great. "They called my uncle and then took me to my parents," she recalls. "I was so happy to see them. I hugged them, and they were so happy to see me again."


In the midst of tragedy, the joy of being with parents and other family members is helping many Haitian children heal their sadness. UNICEF will continue working with separated and orphaned children to ensure that many more have the same opportunity.

### FURTHER RESOURCES

 **Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) – Disaster in Haiti**  
<http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2010/01/13/f-haiti-earthquake.html>

 **UNICEF Canada – BLOG: Our Haiti Mission**  
<http://www.unicef.ca/portal/Applications/Core/sbNews/sbNews.aspx?NewsID=768&am=5748&rp=2472>

 **UNICEF Canada – Earthquake in Haiti**  
<http://www.unicef.ca/portal/SmartDefault.aspx?at=2472>

 **UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Multimedia: Photos and Videos of Haiti, 2010.***  
<http://ochaonline.un.org/OCHAHome/WhereWeWork/Haiti/Multimedia/tabid/6427/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How would it feel to have lost your family during a disaster? Where would you go for help?
- Whose responsibility is it to protect and help children like those in the story?
- Why are children, unaccompanied by family, thought to be the most vulnerable to abuse, malnutrition, and emotional trauma?

### ACTIVITIES

- Why was Haiti so ill-prepared for this earthquake? Research Haiti's history for answers.
- Brainstorm ways you can support the relief efforts in Haiti. Make good on one of your ideas.
- Understand how complex the relief effort has been in Haiti. View the OCHA videos (see *Further Resources*).
- Read some of the UNICEF Canada blog entries from Haiti (see *Further Resources*). Imagine yourself as a journalist in Haiti and write your own blog entry.
- Choose a photo of the situation in Haiti that speaks to you (see *Further Resources – OCHA multimedia*). Examine the photo carefully and write a story that answers the question: What happens to the people in the photo after the camera click?