

US Bishops Stress Needs of Haitian Women, Children Outline Reconstruction Priorities

WASHINGTON, D.C., AUG. 16, 2010 (Zenit.org).- A delegation from the U.S. bishops' conference noted that reconstruction in Haiti has been slow, and the women and children in that country especially need protection from crime.

The delegation from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is preparing a report to be released next month, in which they will publicize their findings from a July 26-Aug. 2 trip to the Caribbean region.

The mission committee, led by Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami and Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, New York, traveled to Haiti to assess the reconstruction efforts after a Jan. 12 earthquake. They also went to the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic to analyze the situation of Haitians in those countries.

Archbishop Wenski observed, "It is clear that efforts to clean up and recover from the earthquake are progressing slowly."

"The international community must remain steadfast in working with the Haitian government to reconstruct the country and strengthen its institutions," he stated. "The survival and long-term future of the Haitian people are at stake."

The delegation focused their assessment on the most vulnerable groups, especially children and women.

Bishop DiMarzio warned that "children, especially those who have lost parents or are separated from them, remain at grave risk."

He continued, "Without a more concerted effort to protect them and find long-term solutions for their care, they will become even more vulnerable to criminal elements, including smugglers and human traffickers."

Another delegate, Maria Odom, executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc, reported: "Women, especially single mothers with children, are struggling to feed and protect their families, but at the same time are themselves exposed to gender-based violence. More must be done to enhance their security."

Catholic Relief Services

The delegation visited orphanages and camps as well as several program sites operated by Catholic Relief Services, which has been a major part of the reconstruction effort.

The delegates compiled a list of recommendations for moving forward in the aid effort for Haiti, in the short and long term.

They called on the U.S. government officials to provide humanitarian parole to family members of Haitians receiving medical treatment in the United States and to strengthen efforts to help children in shelters locate their relatives.

They called for the implementation of a "proactive asylum screening program for Haitians who are interdicted at sea, with appropriate adjudicators and language specialists aboard Coast Guard ships."

The delegation encouraged increased partnership with the Haitian government to reconstruct the country, increase security, develop agriculture, and decentralize the economy.

"This is a pivotal moment in Haiti's history which requires cooperation and patience," Archbishop Wenski affirmed.

He noted that "Haiti is at a crossroads and it is crucial that the international community not lessen its commitment to the rebuilding process."

The prelate continued, "It will take time to make Haiti whole again, but it is important that the Haitian people and the children of Haiti -- its future leaders -- do not lose hope."