



MEMORANDUM: SITUATION OF HAITIAN CHILDREN

Wednesday, February 03, 2010

In the aftermath of the horrific earthquake that shook Haiti January 12, the needs of orphaned and unaccompanied children are foremost in the minds of those who want to help. There has been an outpouring of interest and good will on the part of U.S. officials and the general public, but it is essential that efforts to help these children are carried out in a responsible way that takes into consideration the safety and best interest of each child.

As organizations with long histories of service to vulnerable children, Migration and Refugee Services/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (MRS/USCCB), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA) are doing all we can to help protect the children displaced by this disaster. We are closely monitoring the situation on the ground and, while supportive of the UN-led child protection effort underway, have concerns about the way in which some actors are responding to the needs of children.

While some Haitian children were legally confirmed as eligible for inter-country adoption prior to the earthquake and have been matched with approved adoptive parents, they constitute a small portion of the overall population of unaccompanied children. Other children lived in orphanages prior to the earthquake but still have living family members, as it is common for Haitian children to be placed in orphanages temporarily while their families are unable to care for them. There are also those children who have been temporarily or permanently separated from their caregivers by the earthquake. These children do not yet know if they will find their families. In still other cases, U.S. citizen and non-citizen children in Haiti have family here in the United States, or are living abroad but have family still in Haiti. Each of these groups of children requires a different response to correspond with their best interests.

It is important to know that children who have not been legally adopted or who are in the process of adoption but have not been finally approved must go through many important processes before adoption becomes a possibility. While it is natural to want to bring these children immediately to the United States and place them for adoption, this is not necessarily in the best interest of the child.

Any humane response to the situation of Haiti's unaccompanied and orphaned children must be guided by the following principles:

- The safety and security of the children must be ensured.
- Each unaccompanied or separated child should be registered and screened so that placement decisions are based on his or her best interest.
- Wherever possible, children should be reunited with their families.
- Access to asylum protection should be ensured for those who need it.
- Haitian children paroled into the U.S. should be placed and cared for according to current U.S. government practice for unaccompanied children.



MRS/USCCB, CRS, and CCUSA recommend that the following steps be taken to protect vulnerable children in Haiti:

- Support the UN-led effort underway to provide safe haven in Haiti for the care and screening of separated and unaccompanied Haitian minors.
- Ensure that all unaccompanied and separated children are registered and screened in line with international child protection standards. Family tracing must be conducted for all of these children.
- Ensure that placement decisions for children are based on recommendations from child welfare experts and that they prioritize family reunification.
- Facilitate the unification of Haitian children who, prior to the earthquake, were legally confirmed as eligible for inter-country adoption and have been matched with approved adoptive parents. In the U.S., these children are eligible for humanitarian parole.
- Ensure that children in need of urgent medical care are able to access life saving services as soon as possible, whether in Haiti or in another country. Whenever possible, these children should be accompanied by a parent or guardian if one is available.
- Priority should be placed on the reunification of Haitian children with family or guardians in Haiti before considering placement with family overseas.
- Ensure that humanitarian parole is available to allow reunification of families in which members have varying immigration status. Separated Haitian children, whether in Haiti or the U.S., should be able to legally join their family members or have their family members join them to provide needed care in the wake of this disaster.
- Ensure that unaccompanied Haitian children arriving in the U.S. without guardians are placed in the care of the Department of Health and Human Services, the agency charged with caring for unaccompanied minors in the United States. Children should be placed in the least restrictive setting possible, with priority placed on use of the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor foster care program.

When responding to inquiries regarding U.S. adoptions of Haitian children, please refer to the website of Catholic Charities USA at www.catholiccharitiesadoptions.org.

For U.S. citizens with pending adoption cases in Haiti: detailed information about their cases should be sent to HaitianAdoptions@dhs.gov. This is the official site of the Dept. of Homeland Security designated to respond to these cases

MRS/USCCB, CRS, and CCUSA will be working with appropriate government agencies to ensure that these policies are adopted and appropriately implemented. We will keep you informed during the process.

Thank you for your support and commitment.