

# Catholic leaders outline steps they say are key for Haitian adoptions

WASHINGTON - The heads of five Catholic agencies that work with Haitian earthquake victims have outlined steps they say the U.S. government should take to protect children left alone after the Jan. 12 earthquake.

In a Feb. 4 letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, the heads of Catholic refugee, immigrant and relief organizations urged specific steps to be followed before “children are brought to the United States and placed in any legal adoption proceedings.”

The agency heads acknowledged the compassion of people in the United States as demonstrated by the “many offers to adopt children who might have lost their parents in the tragedy.”

In any humanitarian crisis, they said, “many children are left without anyone to care for them. Whether parents or guardians are killed or families are separated by war or natural disaster, these children are in dire need of special assistance or protection. In order to properly serve these children and to ensure that their special needs are met, safeguards and procedures must be established that preserve the best interest of each individual child.”

The Catholic leaders stressed that Haitian children who are not already matched with U.S. adoptive parents should only be brought to this country if it is determined to be in the best interest of those children.

The letter was signed by Johnny Young, executive director of the Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; Maria Odom, executive director of Catholic Legal Immigration Network; Father Larry Snyder, executive director of Catholic Charities USA; Ken Hackett, president of Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops’ overseas relief and development agency; and Johan Ketelers, secretary-general of the Geneva-based International Catholic Migration

Commission.

"Family reunification is an important goal and must be protected to the greatest extent possible, while placement with a guardian within Haiti will sometimes prove to be the appropriate course," they wrote. "If no family or appropriate guardian is found, and if it is further determined that it is in the child's best interest not to remain in Haiti, the child should be considered for international placement."

Save the Children, the international aid organization the United Nations has asked to coordinate efforts to reunite Haitian children and their families, has similarly stressed the need to make every attempt to reunite children with their families and evaluate orphans' needs before adoptions take place.

A Jan. 21 press release from Save the Children said that "it is almost always in the best interests of a child to remain with their relatives and extended family, when possible."

It also noted that the chances of a child being mistakenly identified as an orphan are "incredibly high."

Deana Myers, vice president of international programs for Save the Children, told Catholic News Service that the risk is great of children having their rights ignored or being exploited by human traffickers and the child-sex trade. She added that keeping children in familiar surroundings - around food, language, customs and people they know - goes a long way toward helping them come through such a traumatic experience in good physical and emotional shape.

"The process needs to unfold at its own pace," she said. "The key is to take the time to do this thoughtfully," while at the same time guaranteeing that children have food, water and a safe place to live.

Reiterating a similar message, the Catholic agency leaders said in their letter that as "a general rule it would not be in the best interest of Haiti's children, or Haiti as a whole, for unaccompanied children to be evacuated from their home country without a careful, individualized assessment of what is best for each of them."

"While it is important to respond quickly to protect these children in the wake of the

disaster, long-term harm could come to them if this response is not carried out in line with international protection standards,” they said.

They urged U.S. leaders to make sure several procedures were in place before U.S. adoptions of Haitian children could proceed:

- Establish safe havens in Haiti so children have security and proper care.
- Assign child welfare experts to make determinations for the best interest of each child and the best placements for children.
- Make every effort to locate families so children can be reunited with them.
- Place children whose best interests would be served by relocation to the United States in foster care.
- Expedite consular processing for U.S. citizens or permanent residents with minor children in Haiti and for those with approved petitions for family reunification.

The Catholic leaders said they were “heartened to learn that the U.S. government, in cooperation with the United Nations and the government of Haiti, has taken steps to protect Haitian unaccompanied children within Haiti and to locate parents or family members.”

“We appreciate the response of the U.S. government to the natural disaster in Haiti and hope to work with you to ensure that these vulnerable children, as well as other victims of the earthquake, receive the care and support they need to resume their lives,” they added.

They also emphasized that reconstruction funds should include resources for the Haitian government to provide protection to unaccompanied children who remain in Haiti so they do not become victims of human traffickers.