

Haitian institutions that took in quake victims buckling under strain

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic – Catholic schools and orphanages in the Haitian countryside that took in thousands of children displaced by the January earthquake are buckling under the increased financial strain, administrators say.

Outside of Les Cayes, a city on Haiti's southwestern peninsula about 120 miles from the capital, one school took in 350 children. Another saw its expenses swell by thousands of dollars. Others are running out of space for the new enrollees. Many say they are struggling to pay the bills.

The January earthquake that destroyed Port-au-Prince and affected 20 percent of the country did not physically damage many of the social projects of religious orders outside of the capital. But the Catholic missions that opened their arms to people who fled the city say they are now struggling, and the church is not helping.

"The church? What church? There has been no support to help most of the families that left Port-au-Prince," said Father Marc Boisvert, a member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Father Boisvert runs Project Hope South, which has an orphanage, five schools and a carpentry-training center outside of Les Cayes. He estimates that the schools took in 350 additional students and 100 orphans displaced by the earthquake. He says his budget went from \$100,000 to \$140,000 a month after taking in the new students. He relies on donations from the United States to fund the project.

"There was just a tsunami of people that came. And what can we do?" he asked. "We never had support from the government here. The best thing you can say about the government is that it's inept."

For decades, Haitians had migrated to the capital seeking jobs and an escape from their hardscrabble rural communities. But the earthquake sent an estimated 600,000 residents back to the countryside, where they stayed with family members or friends.

Catholic social projects welcomed them with “open arms,” said the director of one school who asked for anonymity because of sensitivities with potential sources of funding.

“We were running out of space because we took in so many new students. We were glad to do it, but how are we supposed to pay for it?” the director asked.

Several other Oblates running projects in the area refused to speak on the record about the situation. The Salesian Sisters of St. John Bosco directed Catholic News Service to a statement that said, “There is a need to build other classrooms for the schools in Les Cayes” and other locations where children flocked to after the quake. The school is running out of space to educate the new enrollees.

Episcopal Father Kesner Ajax, who works throughout Les Cayes, said many of the orders feel their projects are being passed over for money, despite the fact that they took in the displaced.

“They need a lot of help. The situation in Les Cayes is quiet compared to Port-au-Prince, but areas like this one are where many of the displaced went after the earthquake,” he said. “The situation is difficult.”

The religious say they were asked to educate displaced children with the promise that money would follow to reimburse them for the increased costs.

A July 19 letter from the U.S.-based Missionary Oblate Partnership obtained by CNS airs similar complaints. The letter’s writer, Arthur Pingolt, president of the partnership, visited Haiti in early July and met with 100 Oblates in southern Haiti.

His letter states that the Oblates said Archbishop Bernardito Auza, the apostolic nuncio in Haiti, asked the schools to “take all the children of the (Port-au-Prince) diaspora into their schools but since that time has not made good on ... a ‘promise’ to reimburse them for this cost.”

“In the case of the Oblates, their ‘open arms’ response may cost them an estimated \$100,000, a very significant figure in their budget. This anger was shared by native Haitians as well as American/European Oblates,” Pingolt wrote.

Pingolt did not respond to a CNS request for an interview.

Archbishop Auza told CNS that he “never promised” the schools that he could repay them for their expenses.

“I said that I’d try to help. I told them they could send their requests. But they’ve asked for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Not even in Port-au-Prince is it possible to spend that much,” he said.

The archbishop said he has limited resources and is focused on helping projects damaged by the January quake.

“Les Cayes was not affected by the earthquake,” he said. “I’m disappointed by (the accusations). They’re asking for school reconstruction. ... If I were to give money to school reconstruction, it would be for schools in Port-au-Prince.”

Father Juan Molina, who advises the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Latin America, praised Archbishop Auza for his leadership in the predominantly Catholic country that lost Port-au-Prince Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot and dozens of priests, seminarians and in the disaster.

“He has been very involved throughout the country and worked closely on numerous issues,” said Father Molina, who visited Haiti and met with Archbishop Auza in July.

“It remains a very difficult situation, not just in Port-au-Prince but also elsewhere,” he added. “They were already coping with very limited resources ... and now they have additional people” to care for.

Archbishop Auza agreed, saying he wished he had money to cover all the costs incurred by everyone.

“There’s just not enough to go around,” he said.

The situation touches on a larger issue in the rebuilding of Haiti. From government officials to experts, nearly everyone agrees that rebuilding the country should include decentralization: creating job opportunities outside of Port-au-Prince.

Yet, that goal remains elusive. International donors have pledged billions to help

Haiti rebuild, but most of the money is focused on Port-au-Prince, where most of the devastation occurred and aid agencies have set up food distribution centers and created jobs for Haitians.

On Aug. 17, the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission announced it would use some of the money to create agricultural jobs. The committee, which is charged with identifying projects that would receive funding, said the \$200 million planned for rural Haiti would create 50,000 jobs.

But that is a long-term plan. Meanwhile, the situation in Port-au-Prince has become so attractive that many of those who fled to the countryside are now returning to the city,

“They hear that there’s food distribution on every corner and that jobs are being handed out,” Father Boisvert said. “So now they’re going back.”