

Haitian orphans at risk

Reviews

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Port-au-Prince - Haitian children made orphans by this month's catastrophic earthquake or separated from their parents face a growing threat from child traffickers or illicit adoptions, the government and aid groups say.

They fear unscrupulous traffickers may try to exploit the chaos and social turmoil following the January 12 quake to spirit defenceless infants out of the impoverished country through the airport or across the land border with the Dominican Republic.

A police unit tasked with protecting minors has sent officers to the border but officials said that like every other Haitian institution, the unit was hit hard by the earthquake that killed at least 120 000 people and probably many more.

"We are very concerned that there are increasing reports that children are being picked up and trafficked out of the country," said Kent Page, a spokesperson for the UN Children's Fund (Unicef). But he had no details of specific cases.

Authorities also fear that legitimate aid groups may have flown earthquake orphans out of the country for adoption before efforts to find their parents had been exhausted.

Adoptions stopped

As a result, the Haitian government last week halted these types of adoptions. "There is no question that either NGOs (non-governmental organisations) or institutions of any kind can take children off the streets [for adoption] and say that they are orphans," said Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive, expressing his fears that this might be happening.

There are no reliable estimates of the number of parentless and lost children at risk in Haiti's quake-shattered capital Port-au-Prince. Hungry, homeless minors fending for themselves in the city are a common sight.

Around 700 children who lost touch with their parents during the quake have been registered and placed in camps and efforts at reunification are under way, said Unicef's Page.

But in an indication of the scale of the problem, a Haitian children's charity working in the Delmar 31 neighbourhood of the capital said it had identified 3 000 children that it considered in danger.

Some joined gangs of looters last week, smashing into stores in the city's main commercial district in search of food and goods to sell, said Alveus Prospere, the president of the Organisation for a Better Future for Children charity.

Many others have been taken in by relatives or neighbours now living in makeshift camps where food is scarce, he said.

Admin vs human need

A US Christian charity, For His Glory Outreach, flew 80 Haitian children to the United States on Saturday for adoption and plans to take out 29 more in the coming days, according to Michael Gibson, a member of the charity's board.

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<http://www.sevafrica.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1279>

The children lived at the House of the Children of God orphanage in the Haitian capital before their departure and all had the necessary paperwork signed by Haitian authorities before the quake, he said.

Even before the quake, economic pressure and grinding hardship in what was already the poorest country in the western hemisphere provided a powerful incentive for some Haitian parents to seek adoption for their children.

Child protection experts fear the Haitian government's problems in maintaining control and oversight in the country, now hugely exacerbated by the quake, could also give freer rein to well-meaning potential adopters willing to cut corners.

For His Glory has had no contact with the Haitian government since the quake, said Gibson, whose family adopted Haitian twins in 2007.

"I don't believe there is a [functioning] Haitian government," he told Reuters in an interview. Most of the children at the orphanage, who have been sleeping on dirty mattresses in the yard since the quake, have parents alive and retain contact with them, so they are not technically orphans at all.

Twelve-year-old Judlanda Toussaint came to the orphanage three years ago because her parents could not afford to look after her, according to workers at the institution.

"I want to go to America so I can help my family back home," said Toussaint.

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