

January 13, 2010

Half-Hour for Haiti: Responding to Haiti's Devastation

Good News first: We do actually have some good news: Mario Joseph and the rest of the team at the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux escaped unharmed. The office is damaged, but not destroyed. Former BAI lawyer Pooja Bhatia is also ok (and [Tweeting](#) and [writing](#) about the earthquake), and our former office manager, Pascal Duvivier survived the earthquake. The other good news is the strength of the network of friends, collaborators and supporters who have sent their prayers and hopes for the safety of our team and friends in Haiti. Thank you.

The Bad News: I have little to add to the descriptions of devastation that we are all reading and watching. I am not hearing much from our friends on the ground, I can rarely reach anyone. I expect we will start receiving the bad news about friends, collaborators and clients soon enough, and we will share some of those stories on [our website](#).

In the meantime it's hard to watch such suffering and not be able to help directly – because I am 3,200 miles away, and because a law degree can't set broken bones or lift concrete. But there are things we can all do, even if their impact will take some time to be felt.

First, we can act as citizens of our countries. In the U.S., we have been campaigning for [Temporary Protected Status](#) (TPS) for Haitians since the 2008 hurricanes. Haiti was fully qualified for this status, which allows visitors from countries suffering from political or environmental stress to stay in the U.S. and work, before the earthquakes, but even now the U.S. Administration is only saying it will consider TPS, which it [has already been considering](#) since February. Please do the good, and easy [action alert](#) that our friends at TransAfrica Forum have posted, urging more resolute action.

Second, we can shape the debate about emergency relief that we are having, once again. We may not be able to prevent earthquakes and hurricanes, but we can limit Haiti's extreme vulnerability to environmental stresses. The majority of the deaths from this earthquake will be suffered in the poor neighborhoods of poorly built houses crowded together on the precarious hills above Port-au-Prince and the ravines in the city. The people living in those houses knew the dangers, but they could not afford safer housing for their families, and the government lacked the will or the resources to enforce its building codes. We need to insist that the international community's response to the earthquake includes long-term assistance to make Haiti less vulnerable to the next natural disaster. See good articles on this by [Tracy Kidder](#) and [Peter Hallward](#). I've raised the issue today in interviews with [Air America](#), and [Talk Radio News](#), and expect to do so Thursday on [Democracy Now!](#). On Thursday, IJDH and several other human rights organizations will issue an advisory on Integrating Human Rights Into Disaster Response (check [our website](#) later).

Third, we can help with emergency disaster relief. IJDH and BAI do not have skills in this area, so we are stepping aside and letting those who do have the skills do their work, and urging everyone to support that work financially. There are many groups doing excellent disaster relief on the ground already, but if past is prologue some groups will not spend their donations well. So

make sure that you give donations to organizations that have a strong track record and are accountable, and have a long term vision for combating inequality and exploitation in Haiti. I will personally recommend three IJDH collaborators, [Partners in Health](#), the [Haiti Emergency Relief Fund](#) and the [What If? Foundation](#), but there are many more organizations worthy of support.

We deeply appreciate the generosity of everyone who has responded to the earthquake by contributing to IJDH and BAI. When the dust settles we will need funds to repair the office and help staff members get back on their feet, including one who lost everything but his family when his house collapsed. And although we do not do disaster relief work, we do do *disaster prevention*: all of our legal and advocacy work is designed to help our clients, and the poor of Haiti in general, to reduce the danger from natural, economic and political disasters through the enforcement of their rights to clean water, healthcare, education and fair treatment in the courts.

The BAI will get back to work advancing the rule of law, probably in a few days. So will the people of Haiti, who have rebounded time and again from catastrophes, giving the world lessons in courage and tenacity. Those of us watching from afar can find hope and comfort in Haitians' resilience. But we should also get back to work, to make sure that next time Haitians do not need to rebound from so far down.

Brian Concannon Jr.
Director
Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti

For more information about the Half-Hour For Haiti program, the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti (IJDH) or human rights in Haiti, see our website, www.HaitiJustice.org. To receive Half-Hour for Haiti Action Alerts (about 2 per month), send an email to HalfHour4Haiti@ijdh.org.