

Orphans endure 17-day nightmare

Dan Jensen/Publisher

Omaha ministry stands ready to relocate orphanage in wake of massive floods

On Sept. 1, Hurricane Hanna traversed through the Caribbean and inundated the tiny island nation of Haiti with torrential rains, which caused widespread flooding and landslides in the northern portions of the country. On Saturday, Sept. 6 Hurricane Ike followed the same course as Hanna and it too wreaked havoc on this, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

In both cases, the coastal city of Gonaives was immersed with widespread flooding, as rains fell and flood waters poured in from the surrounding mountains. In many areas, the flooding completely covered the entire first story of thousands of homes, leaving people stranded on their roofs hanging on to protruding rebar for dear life, as raging waters gushed up over their knees.

The FMI orphanage in Haiti sustained horrific damage as two hurricanes flooded the city, but every one of our children was spared death, as they watched the raging floodwaters rise all around them and fill the entire first floor of their home. Late last year, funding was provided for a second story addition to the FMI — “Gift of God” orphanage in Gonaives. Construction was completed earlier this year and soon the family of 25 children who had been living in the orphanage grew to 45.

Little did we know that the Lord, who of course knows the future, had already been watching over His little ones.

In His plan He had moved on the hearts of some friends of this ministry and provided financial resources to build the second story. Had that second story not been in place at the time of these floods, there is no doubt in our minds that some of the children would have been lost. The Lord is indeed amazing, loving and kind, even in the midst of extreme loss and devastation.

The children in the orphanage endured a 16 day nightmare living through extremes. While their lives were preserved from the raging floodwaters, the aftermath is of no small fallout. Everything on the main floor was destroyed, including their food and fresh water supplies. They spent the first several days after the flood with no food. Once the waters from the first flood began to recede, a few pieces of fruit were found near them that had washed in with the waters. For that tiny sustenance, we were deeply grateful unto the Lord. Some remaining cans of food were found in the first floor as the water receded — again a little bit of food for 45 starving children.

Mud and waters in the neighborhood and on the orphanage site stranded the staff and children on the second story for more than two weeks. The stench of death was everywhere as not only livestock, but people as well, lost their lives in the floods.

The orphanage director, Smith, was in the capitol city of Port-au-Prince at the time the first flood struck Gonaives. He was separated from his precious 45 children who call him “papa,” and his heart was crushed as he learned that his city was under water. The only two roadways leading to the city were under water and a bridge system both from the south and the north to the city were wiped out.

There was no way home, no way to get to the children he and his wife so deeply love. Nine days would pass before he would be able to make in back to Gonaives. Giving all his strength, Smith ventured from the capitol to the northern coastal city of Cap Haitien, via a small inter-country flight. From there he would have to travel to the south in an effort to get to his children. The national roadway to his city sustained mud slides and a destroyed bridge over a river. He would take a small taxi truck as far as it could go and then he would hike through the mud and river in an effort to reach the children. He soon ran out of water with miles yet to go over an incredibly difficult route. By day’s end, he had walked through raging chest-deep waters but made it to the desperate children.

Shouts of joy rang out from the suffering children as they saw Smith approaching through the mud and waters on his way to the orphanage. “Papa is coming,” they cried, “now everything will be okay.”

Eight days after Smith’s arrival at the orphanage, there was still no way to get out of the city, as the roadways were underwater. Even with Smith’s arrival, each day was an extreme trial as he and a few other men had to walk through chest-deep water and then miles down the main road to get to food and fresh water supplies. They carried only as much as they could on their shoulders to keep it above the waters and get it back to not only the 45 hungry children, but the eight women on staff and their children, and numerous people from the surrounding community who had taken refuge at the orphanage.

In an effort to help the children, a helicopter came one day and lowered food and fresh drinking water. It seemed that finally there was a light at the end of the tunnel and there would be some relief from the extreme difficulty in getting supplies to the children. It was a very short-lived relief effort. Soon after the helicopter left, the orphanage was mobbed by desperate people in the surrounding community. They came to rob the children of their food and water.

Smith shared as much as he could but there was not nearly enough provision to meet the needs of so many desperate, hungry and thirsty people who too had lost everything. He told them that the remaining supplies were for the children, but they became infuriated and even stole the shoes and clothing that the staff had retrieved from the mud on the first floor of the orphanage. They stole from orphans. Angry men in the mob threatened to return during the night to rob them of any remaining food and water.

I prayed with Smith over the phone that night and shared the need for God's hand of protection over him and the children. There were no doubt hundreds of prayers lifted before the throne of God that night, as well as every other night and day as this tragedy has taken place. Smith, who was already extremely exhausted from each day's journey through the mud and waters, stayed up all that night to stand guard against thieves. He heard them return in the night, but they did not attempt to enter the orphanage. There is no doubt that the Lord had stationed angels there to protect them from those unruly men.

Finally, after 16 agonizing days the children would be moved near the capitol city of Port-au-Prince. On a good day this 85-mile trip takes four hours on the national road system that is riddled with large potholes, broken blacktop and long stretches of barren rocky roadway. For the children, it was a treacherous 11-hour journey as they exited the city of Gonaives on the national highway that is now part of a lakebed.

Later down the road, they had to leave the truck that carried them, and cross through a river on foot. The bridge that once connected the country from north to south was washed out by the flooding. On the other side they were met by missionaries from a gracious ministry who then transported them to their orphanage a short distance north of Port-au-Prince. Smith is now in the process of procuring temporary housing for the children for the next year as we reassess the ministry and discern how the Lord would have us move forward.

The orphanage site and the home of Smith's family in Gonaives are no longer viable options for the orphanage and staff in Haiti. That city has now suffered three major floods in four years. It is not safe to try to rebuild and restore the existing sites for these children. Now is a time to forge ahead and begin anew, from the ground up, as we believe that the Lord has not given up on these, His precious children. We believe He has a plan for them as we move forward to love and care for them in a temporary site and pursue a permanent new location.

Please pray for these children, for the directors and the staff of the FMI – Don de Dieu Orphelinat (Gift of God Orphanage) in Haiti, and the people of this nation who have suffered extreme loss and trials.

How you can help

When the floods swept into Gonaives, Haiti, all was lost at the orphanage. Clothing and shoes were stolen by the mob. The children's beds are gone, the very little they had to begin with is gone. We will need to purchase clothing, shoes, beds, linens, food, cook-ware, dishes, cups and the list goes on. Please consider how you might help with the rebuilding of these lives and the future home for them.

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Financial gifts can be directed to:

Faith Missions International
PO Box 34038
Omaha NE 68134

Mark your gift with an attached note for "Haiti"; You will receive a receipt for your contribution. Your gift is tax-deductible as allowed by law.

Click on Haiti Disaster Update button above for updates on the critical situation at our orphanage in Haiti.

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