

# Haiti's ongoing disaster

By Donna J. Barry and Kimberly Cullen  
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THE DUST has settled around College La Promesse Evangelique, the Haitian school that crumbled down on hundreds of students and their teachers earlier this month. The death toll of about 100, and the grief, helplessness, and anger of the affected families have reached deep into other countries, including our own. Amid this profound, senseless, preventable loss, we should also recognize that, for the children who perished, and nearly all children in Haiti, their safety, wellbeing, and education are in jeopardy each day; this is about more than poorly constructed buildings.

The first challenge a child must overcome to receive an education in Haiti is to live long enough to attend. Child mortality in Haiti is the highest in the Western Hemisphere. Eight children out of every 100 die before their 5th birthday, mainly for lack of food, clean water, and access to health services. Each year, over 22,000 children under 5 die from preventable causes including malnutrition, pneumonia, diarrhea, and malaria.

If a child does reach school age, a good education in Haiti is very difficult to obtain. Due to severely limited government funds, the public education system in Haiti barely functions. To put this in perspective, Haiti's 2007 budget for the Ministry of Education was approximately \$122 million for a school-age population of 2.8 million. The 2009 budget for Boston Public Schools is \$827.5 million for 56,000 students.

Fifty percent of Haitian children do not attend school at all, and among those who do, the vast majority (80 percent) attend private and parochial schools like La Promesse. There is a shortage of qualified teachers and there are virtually no standards imposed on private schools regarding the number of students in a class, student evaluation, or curricula. Still, people in Haiti place great value on receiving an education, even if just to the point of basic literacy.

Unfortunately, school fees put basic education out of reach for millions of people. Spending \$70 to \$80 per child on school fees or supplies and uniforms is impossible for a family earning Haiti's per capita GDP of \$480 per year. Given the increased financial stresses worldwide, Haiti too finds itself at the mercy of large fluctuations in prices of basic commodities. Food prices have soared and sparked riots in a nation that is so starved as to need a new phrase to describe their hunger pains - it is like drinking bleach, they say.

In addition to the food crisis and this terrible tragedy, the country is still reeling from the devastation following four hurricanes earlier this fall.

Given all these hardships, the Haiti government is still obligated to use what little money it has to pay off the debt to international financial institutions, much of it accrued by past dictators. This is money that the government would otherwise likely put toward healthcare and education. Even with the crises of food price inflation, hurricane recovery, and this tragedy, the government of Haiti continues to pay nearly \$1 million per week.

There is much the United States can do to ease Haiti's burden. Before the end of the year, Congress can fund additional hurricane recovery aid. Our Treasury secretary can recommend that Haiti's debt to international financial institutions that has already been approved for cancellation be erased immediately. New foreign assistance guidelines can ensure that the funding we currently give to Haiti reaches the poorest and most vulnerable, and doesn't stay in Washington as administrative expenses for nonprofits and shipping companies. The new administration should appoint an ambassador to Haiti who can serve as a messenger of hope to this nation that has been the victim of some of the United States' worst trade, military, and foreign policy interventions.

We cannot bring back the children who were lost in the school collapse, but we can and must succeed in helping prevent any further unnecessary deaths.

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