

Haiti earthquake brings despair, and demands for a better future



On Jan. 12, I, like many others, was shocked and deeply saddened to watch the tremendous devastation in Haiti unfold after a 7.0-magnitude earthquake shook the island nation. Most disturbing were the images that came to blanket media coverage in the subsequent days. Photos of bodies pulled from the rubble, children left orphaned, people with severe injuries, and haunting images of survivors desperately trying to find food and water filled the news.

Alongside the torrent of emotions was a tremendous pride in nursing. It only took hours for colleagues from across the province to contact RNAO looking for ways to help. Nurses' selfless desire to rush to the aid of fellow strangers reassured me of the great compassion that exists in humanity. Several RNAO members travelled to help in Haiti following the earthquake, including Valerie Rzepka, policy analyst at RNAO and chair of the Canadian Medical Assistance Teams (CMAT), a volunteer disaster medical relief unit that has responded to numerous other tragedies, including the 2004 tsunami in Asia. She was joined by many health-care colleagues, including RNAO members Carolyn Davies, Maida Mrakovic and Aric Rankin. Countless other RNs are also doing their best on the ground to relieve Haitians' suffering, while others are making donations to non-governmental organizations. Your association is also helping and has donated \$2,000 to CMAT.

The work these brave nurses are doing is not without risk. That was a cruel reminder when I learned one of our own colleagues was killed during the quake. Yvonne Martin, an RN from Elmira, Ontario, had just arrived in the country to begin an aid mission when the earthquake hit. Yvonne, fully committed to working with the Haitian people, was about to begin her fourth visit to the country when

the hotel she was staying in collapsed. Speaking with her son Luke, I expressed our deepest condolences for the family's loss, our loss, and our praise for Yvonne's determination to improve wellness for Haitians living in horrific poverty.

This most recent natural disaster has brought the world's focus to Haiti, but it has long been a country troubled by abject poverty, economic dependency, a troubled political history, and environmental degradation—all denying this country's nine million people their basic human rights. In Haiti, the poorest nation in the western

Haiti, the infant mortality rate is 60 deaths per 1,000 live births. The last time it was that high in Canada was 1941. Today, Canada's infant mortality is just five per 1,000 live births. And 120,000 people in Haiti are estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS. Before the earthquake, it was a country that was already considered to have a high risk of infectious diseases. Now that so many people are living in temporary camps with limited access to clean water and proper sanitation, the chance of diseases like cholera spreading will only grow, threatening to devastate weakened people even further.

Haiti will continue to lie in a region that is prone to earthquakes and other catastrophes like hurricanes, and will also be affected by climate change aggravated by the country's awful deforestation, soil erosion and inadequate water supplies. However, there is much we can and must do to ameliorate these disasters, and even more to change their outcomes. Haiti is the second largest recipient of Canada's foreign aid – it is essential that our tax dollars be well spent. We must advocate for the immediate cancellation of all international debt owed by Haiti, and all emergency aid should be in the form of grants and not loans. We can demand money be spent on building safe homes, health care to provide for the sick, rural development for impoverished farmers, and education and other social programs to help build a country where people can stay well.

The international community must act responsibly. While the urgent task is to make sure humanitarian assistance is effective and reaches the people who are suffering, the kindness the world has shown in the last few weeks should not be short-lived. As global citizens, we have a responsibility to make sure the legacy of this tragedy becomes one of re-building, transformation and hope for Haitians. **RN**

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hemisphere, 66 per cent of the population lives on less than \$1 a day and 47 per cent of the people are undernourished, according to the United Nations World Food Program. More than two-thirds of the labour force is unemployed or underemployed, the inflation rate in 2008 was 15 per cent, and many people lived inside poorly constructed homes that collapsed on top of them when the earthquake hit. Given that these extreme conditions have existed for decades, all world leaders must share the shame that not all of Haiti's external debt had been cancelled. In large part, those debts contributed to the poor quality of life so many in the country endure, and the poor health many Haitians suffer.

Life expectancy in Haiti is just 61 years for men and women, as compared to 81 in Canada. In fact, Canada hasn't had a life expectancy rate so low since 1931. In

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