

**OPERATION PROTECT CHILDREN**  
**A Whole of Government Response to Haiti's Most Vulnerable Children**

January 27, 2010

Public Statement

The United States Government is deeply concerned about the welfare of children affected by the earthquake in Haiti and has pulled together its best and most experienced child protection and care personnel from Washington and the field. Under the leadership of the US Government Special Advisor for Orphans and Vulnerable Children, this team is developing and initiating Operation Protect Children to shape and guide US Government action and to ensure that our efforts are coordinated with that of the international community and that they are implemented in close consultation with the Haitian Government. This team is working on both immediate response issues as well as planning for the coming weeks, months, and years.

The US Government is committed to ensuring that every child who survived the devastating earthquake in Haiti is safe and protected. There are several groups of children who, due to their increased vulnerability, are receiving particular attention. These include children who have been separated from their families during the earthquake and children who were living in orphanages prior to the earthquake.

Many orphanages are caring for large numbers of children. However, it is important to note that most children living in these orphanages were placed there as a result of poverty, not necessarily because they are without a family. Until the status of parents and close relatives of children in orphanages can be determined, the US Government is assuming that family members or relatives are alive.

International and local partners, together with the Haitian Government, have come together to form the Child Protection Sub-cluster in Haiti, led by UNICEF. The US Government is linked into this coordination mechanism, which is working actively to ensure that all available resources and capacities are used rapidly and effectively to improve the safety and wellbeing of the most vulnerable children. The Sub-cluster is carrying out a rapid assessment of orphanages in the earthquake affected zone, with the aim of addressing security and subsistence needs. Safe Spaces have been established to provide nutritional and psychosocial support and activities for displaced children living in camps. In addition, interim care centers have been established to provide 24-hour care for children who have been separated from their families and are unaccompanied by an adult caregiver. As of January 26, UNICEF reports that at least 40,000 children had been reached through these activities. Twenty child Protection Brigades with the Haitian National Police have also been deployed to the airport and borders in an effort to prevent child trafficking.

In addition, the US Government's Response Management Team in Washington is receiving and channeling requests for help to orphanages and directing this information to responders in Haiti. The priority in responding to children affected by the disaster in Haiti is to assist them in the location where they have been living, if possible, and if not, in another part of the country that is as close by as possible. After securing their safety and immediate welfare, efforts will be made to trace family members and assess whether, with assistance, they would be able to provide an adequate level of care. Experience in many other emergencies has shown that rapidly evacuating children to another country, though done with very good intentions, can separate families and is not the best way to ensure children's safety and longer term well-being. It is the United States' view that a child's safety and well-being depend primarily on the protection and care their families are able to provide. In line with this principle, the US Government has made strengthening the capacity of families in Haiti to care for their children one of its highest priorities.

The Child Protection Sub-cluster has initiated a family tracing and reunification program with the aim of reuniting children with immediate or extended family members. It is in the process of setting up a 24 hour help line to facilitate the identification of separated children and tracing of their families. The International Committee of the Red Cross is also providing tracing services in Haiti, in partnership with the Haitian Red Cross. Until every effort has been made to reunite children with their families, adoption cannot be considered. However, the United States is expediting processing for orphans who were in the process of being adopted by American families before January 12, in order to unite them with their adoptive families in a manner that ensures proper safeguards.

#### What is the US Government doing to protect Haiti's most vulnerable children?

- The US Government has established Operation Protect Children to respond to the emergency and long-term needs of Haiti's most vulnerable children, including those who are living in orphanages, unaccompanied and separated from their families.
- Operation Protect Children is being led by the US Government's Special Advisor on Orphans and Vulnerable Children, Gary Newton. Mr. Newton has been in Haiti since January 25<sup>th</sup>.
- Operation Protect Children is supported by the US Government's Response Management Team and the Interagency Working Group on Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Haiti in Washington, DC.
- Operation Protect Children is working hand-in-hand with the Child Protection Sub-cluster in Haiti. The Sub-cluster is led by UNICEF and includes partners from 29 international organizations and non-governmental organizations. Many of these organizations, including UNICEF, are receiving funding from the US Government.
- To date, the US Government has channeled \$14 million through USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance to support the immediate needs of Haiti's most vulnerable children and families, including emergency relief assistance, identification of separated and unaccompanied children, family tracing and the establishment of child-friendly spaces. US Government assistance to Haiti following the earthquake has totaled \$379 million to date.
- The Child Protection Sub-cluster is assessing children's needs at orphanages, camps for internally displaced persons, crèches and hospitals in Port-au-Prince other earthquake-affected areas. Availability of food and services is uneven and the Child Protection Sub-cluster is working with international partners, including the World Food Program, to ensure immediate responses.
- The Child Protection Sub-group is establishing a 24-hour public hotline to facilitate the identification of unaccompanied and separated children and family tracing.
- UNICEF, in cooperation with the Government of Haiti, is establishing sites for emergency interim care for unaccompanied children. These sites will accommodate 900 children.
- Child friendly spaces for 200,000 children are being established with US Government support.
- Twenty child Protection Brigades with the Haitian National Police have also been deployed to the airport and borders in an effort to prevent child trafficking. Identification verification bracelets are being issued for separated and unaccompanied minors.

- Needs are greater than current capacity to respond. The US Government is working with UNICEF and other actors to ensure that needs are met efficiently and effectively.
- The US Government is developing an operational plan to meet the needs of Haiti's most vulnerable children. The operational plan is being developed on the basis of internationally recognized principles, including the Interagency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children.

For more information on the US Government's response to Haiti's most vulnerable children, please contact [HaitianChildrenUSAID@usaid.gov](mailto:HaitianChildrenUSAID@usaid.gov) or (202) 712-0550.

For information pertaining to pending adoptions, please contact [AskCI@state.gov](mailto:AskCI@state.gov).