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**Anger & Hope: Haitian Families Furious Over School Collapse
Justice Watch
By Bill Quigley
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"No one cares about the children, living or dead," one furious father of children in the collapsed school outside of Port au Prince Haiti swore Sunday in an interview. "No one has come to provide any counseling to the children and families who survived. Nothing has been done for the families whose children died. The children now have no school and no books. They are sick and have nightmares. Government officials and people from all the NGOs, they all come, take pictures, make speeches and they leave us with nothing. We need action!"

Reports of the deaths caused by the collapse of the school on Friday continue to climb, reaching nearly 100 on Sunday. Several hundred other children escaped or were rescued. Many are still missing.

"The families of the victims are mad," the father said. "But it is not just the families who are mad. All the people know the government is not making good decisions. We do not trust that the government will help us. No doctors have come. Nobody comes except those who want to take pictures, make reports, and make money. We have been promised everything, but we have received nothing. Watch," he said. "After fifteen days, no one is even going to be talking about this. Only the victims and the families will be talking about it. The government and some other people will get some money out of the disaster and the children and their families and the community will see none of it."

Haiti has been plagued by a string of disasters this year with over 800 dead from four hurricanes that raked the island nation; many of those dead were also children.

The three story school which collapsed, College La Promesse, has for years served hundreds of children from pre-school through high school, ages 3 to 20. The school operated on a hillside in Petionville, a suburb of Port au Prince.

One eight year old girl, who attended the school for three years, reported that her class had just returned from recess when they saw the ceiling in their classroom falling down. She told this writer that she prayed to God to save her and started running but could not see because of all the dust and smoke in the air. "I tried to get out. I heard the building breaking down. I was crying and I ran away. A man teacher grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the school as the whole building was falling. After I got outside, the teacher went back in. I cried and cried because I could not find my brother and sister." The little girl eventually found her family and her brother and sister were not seriously harmed.

"When I try to sleep," said the little girl, "I fear the house is going to fall on me and I see the school falling again." She has bruises on her leg and stomach. Some friends are still missing.

While Petionville is a prosperous suburb of Port au Prince, the school was in a poor neighborhood of the city called Nerrette. Though some news reports have indicated the school tuition was \$1500 US a year, parents say that is absolutely wrong. "It was an inexpensive community school run by a community church," one said.

Reverend Fortin Augustin, founder and operator of the school, was being held and questioned by Haitian authorities over the weekend. Family members of Rev. Augustin said he voluntarily turned himself in Saturday after receiving numerous threats against himself and his family.

Though the government is reportedly considering charging Reverend Augustin with involuntary manslaughter, relatives think he is being blamed for common construction problems in Haiti. The Reverend had his own two daughters in school that day, said a nephew, who brought the injured children for medical treatment. Family members taught there. And for years all his nieces and nephews attended the school. His nephew, who brought food to him on Sunday morning, said that his uncle did not even know that two of his little cousins died in the collapse. "He cried when I told him that," he said. "The family understands why people are angry," the nephew reported, "but this was a family church and a family low-budget school. They were just trying to help the community."

One parent agreed. "I do not think it is the Reverend's fault," he said. "This is all about the government. They allow any type of construction anywhere. Many schools and other buildings in this country are built the same way. Why didn't the Mayor stop the school construction if it was wrong? The Mayor campaigned in this very school and in the church. I accuse the government – the Mayor, the Ministers, even President Preval."

Reverend Gerard Jean-Juste, a Haitian priest and longtime advocate for and with the poor, was deeply saddened by the disaster. "The poorest ones in Haiti cannot continue to live in hazardous conditions, in abject poverty condemned to suffer and die inhumanly. This neighborhood where the school was, Nerrette, is one of the poor areas

in the rich city of Petionville. With some sharing from the wealthy Haitians and good will from municipal authorities, the poor ones next door to the rich ones could have had better treatment and greater services. It is unbelievable that alongside the castles and beautiful and well-built schools for the rich residents of Petionville, there lie, without zoning regulations, the shanty towns."

Haiti is the most impoverished country in the Western Hemisphere. Over half the population (over 4 million) lives on less than \$1 per day and over three-quarters (over 6 million) live on less than \$2 a day. Meanwhile, Haiti is forced to send over one million dollars a week to repay off its foreign debt, over half of which was incurred when the country was ruled by dictators friendly with the US. The 7000 UN troops in Haiti cost over one million dollars each day.

When asked if the parents considered going to court to seek justice from the government, the father scoffed. "Justice in courts in Haiti exists only for the people in the government and the people with money. When you are poor, your justice is in the Bible and in Jesus alone." The parent asked that his name not be used for fear of reprisal. "Everyone knows this is the truth, but in Haiti you can be killed for telling the truth."

The father saw hope in the US Presidential election last week. "Maybe now that Obama is President of the US he can put some pressure on Haiti to do good for the people. Obama is a hope not just for the U.S. but for all America. There are many countries in America, including Haiti. We hope he will be a leader of all the Americas and can help."

Pere Jean-Juste admits the current situation is grim but also sounds a note of hope. "We can provide for the basic needs of the poor in Haiti," he promised. "We cannot continue to just apply bandage solutions to various emergencies while other major catastrophic threats remain over our heads in Haiti. No more bloody coup d'états, no more privatization of public institutions, no more violations of human rights. We can build a new Haiti. All together, with or without support from our allies, yes we can."

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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog


BlackCommentator.com Columnist, Bill Quigley, is a human rights lawyer and law professor at [Loyola University, New Orleans](#). He has been an active public interest lawyer since 1977 and has served as counsel with a wide range of public interest organizations on issues including Katrina social justice issues, public housing, voting rights, death penalty, living wage, civil liberties, educational reform, constitutional rights and civil disobedience. He has litigated numerous cases with the [NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.](#), the [Advancement Project](#), and with the [ACLU of Louisiana](#), for which he served as General Counsel for over 15 years and is one of the lawyers for displaced residents. Bill has visited Haiti many times as a volunteer advocate with the [Institute for Justice and Peace in Haiti](#). Vladmir Laguerre, a journalist in Port au Prince, helped with this article. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Quigley.

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