

# Best Practices: Human Trafficking in Disaster Zones

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Thank you Karen and thank you everyone for joining us online today.

I am pleased to join everyone over the Internet. I appreciate the opportunity to kick-off today's discussion best practices to combat human trafficking in disaster zones.

And, I'm delighted to partner with our friends at Harvard University again.

Thanks Karen McLaughlin for moderating this discussion and to Jean-Robert Cadet – a true hero for so many of us in the anti-trafficking movement – for participating in this important web chat. In a while you will also be hearing from my office, from Dr. Jane Sigmon, my Senior Coordinator for International Programs, and Casey Branchini, a grants assistant in my office who recently returned from the Dominican Republic and Haiti. They'll be participating in the panel discussion later.

From cyclones and floods in Southern Africa to the earthquake in Haiti, the last year has seen a multitude of natural disasters that increased both physical and economic insecurity. We feel that these disasters disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable sectors of society – whether that's migrants, job seekers, or poor families – making them primary targets for exploitation and enslavement.

Here at the Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, we do a lot of things: we create a diagnostic report that gives a snapshot of modern slavery around the world and we provide programmatic funding to prevent instances of trafficking and protect victims. And, we also work with international partners to lower the rate of exploitation in the wake of natural disasters.

And so the U.S. Government's work on relief and redevelopment in Haiti necessarily includes human trafficking and slavery issues over the last few months. When instability shakes governments, communities, and societies as a whole, there is an increased likelihood of exploitation.

And sadly, especially in Haiti. As many of you may know Haiti was ranked as a special case in past Reports. This means that the government efforts could not be ranked because of the on-the-ground circumstances being so bad and the government dysfunction. And things have gotten worse since the earthquake.

Before the earthquake, we were working with local partners; and since then, we continued to work, especially with regards to the enslavement of children in domestic servitude, or as some of them are known, “*restaveks*.” Under the *restavek* system, poor, mostly rural families send their children to cities to live with wealthier families whom they think will provide the children with food, shelter and an education, in exchange for a little bit of work. Sadly, the parents’ dream is often a nightmare for these children.

The majority of trafficking cases are found among the estimated 225,000 or so *restaveks*. Sixty-five percent of the victims are girls between the ages of six and fourteen. They work excessive hours, receive little or no schooling, are unpaid and are often physically and sexually abused. Haitian labor laws require employers to pay domestic workers over the age of 15, so not surprisingly a lot of host families dismiss the *restaveks* just before they turn 15.

As a result, dismissed and runaway *restaveks* make up a significant proportion of the large population of street children in Haiti. They are easy prey for gangs who trap them in prostitution or petty crime. As we have seen in Haiti and in other parts of the world during times of crisis, every minute counts.

So we have preliminarily identified six key lessons from the last four months:

- First, counter-trafficking interventions should be included in contingency planning, and must start in the emergency phase of disaster response. While human trafficking generally does not increase in the immediate days and weeks following a disaster, proper planning in the immediate-term helps reduce the numbers of gaps that traffickers can later exploit when the emergency phase has passed.
- Two: definitions matter. The international community, both on the ground and back at headquarters, must operate in a coordinated way that follows the letter and spirit of the United Nation’s Trafficking in Persons Protocol. The key question that under the Palermo protocol is not whether someone has been moved, it is whether they are in compelled service – whether that service is termed enslavement, involuntary servitude, debt bondage, sex trafficking, forced labor, or practices similar to slavery. All of these euphemisms come down to one thing: modern slavery. Focusing on movement instead of exploitation results in mis-deployment of counter-trafficking resources to border areas, thereby compromising interior enforcement, or resulting in confusion over practices such as adoption. This often undercuts local organizations’ pre-disaster anti-slavery efforts. In Haiti, those local efforts were often focused on *restaveks* and interior protections. In the wake of the earthquake, new working groups brought different assumptions.
- Three: Institutional support is the key to sustainability. Efforts should be made to support the government institutions that play a role in effective anti-trafficking response, including those responsible for social welfare, education, child protection, and the judiciary. International efforts should be focused on supporting the government in playing the predominant role, avoiding fostering dependence on the international community, and they must be well coordinated to leverage resources and avoid duplication of efforts. When an overlay is

needed so that core functions may be carried out, we should mirror existing structures and make room for improvements.

- Fourth: Engagement of local stakeholders and consideration of cultural factors are essential. Sustainable anti-trafficking interventions depend on the robust engagement of civil society and government. They also should take into account cultural factors, such as practices surrounding child custody. In many areas, this requires a concerted effort to build the capacity of civil society, including NGOs, schools, civic associations, and community leaders, to identify the needs of the community, to plan effective interventions, and to obtain the necessary support for their implementation.
- Fifth: Trafficking interventions should pay particular attention to the most vulnerable sectors of the population. Efforts should be made to rapidly identify, register, and provide interim care for separated and unaccompanied children while family tracing is done. Efforts to prevent exploitation should be undertaken for displaced and migrating workers, whether moving within their own country or seeking employment opportunities in nearby countries. Special care should be taken to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly in spontaneous settlements and or official displaced persons camps.
- And finally, sixth: governments should assess the vulnerabilities that exist and ensure that policies, legislative tools and social norms are adequate to respond to the tragedy. Education campaigns to warn populations about the potential for human trafficking and how to inform them about how to receive help are very important. Codes of conduct should be promulgated within rebuilding efforts and economic recovery plans, including job creation for rubble or debris removal, recovery and burial of the dead, construction, and microenterprise. Inadequate legislation or government policies to address human trafficking should be strengthened or created, such as writing and adopting modern anti-slavery laws.

As the world looks to help Haiti build back better, we're undertaking strategic efforts to ensure that future generations of Haitians are allowed to live freely. And, there is hope. Let me take a minute to share an email sent by one of our NGO partners in Haiti. And, I'll quote: "Our team of Child Protection Officers found a five year-old girl walking alone on the street. Despite efforts by our team to softly ask her questions, she was too nervous to speak ... Concerned for the young girl's safety, our Child Protection Officers got her to the closest interim care facility provided by Catholic Relief Services, and announced a description of her on the local radio. Fortunately, not long after the call, her mother and father found her at the center. Our teams were ecstatic that they were able to reunify her with her family, and are very motivated to continue their work." I repeat this for you because this is truly a success story: an unaccompanied child, was reunited with her family, not scooped up by traffickers and used as a child slave. But there are still so many Haitians who continue to be at risk of trafficking and exploitation. There are more success stories yet to be realized. We stand ready to support our NGO partners, to work with the Government of Haiti as it moves a new anti-trafficking law through Parliament, and to work with Haiti to achieve structures that will fight this heinous practice. We stand with them because partnerships are how we can achieve this goal. We bring you to the table because partnerships like with Harvard, like with the

academic world, like with the NGOs on the ground, are how we will fight this fight. We cannot do this alone.

Thank you so much.

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