

News from Haiti...

Gonayiv, Haiti, September 11, 2008, Report from the Field by Anne Hastings, Director of Fonkoze, as reported to Leigh Carter, Executive Director Fonkoze USA.

"We flew in a three-seater helicopter to the edge of Gonayiv. We didn't have U.N. permission to land, and it appeared that the U.S. military had taken over air traffic at the U.N. landing site anyway. So, we landed in a school yard near the edge of town. There were all these children, and tethered goats...I was sure we were going to chop up something as we landed.

Once we landed, we were swarmed by what seemed like 500 people, mostly children, desperate children. They thought we had food or water. We somehow made our way through the mass and started walking toward Gonayiv. National Route 1 was totally covered by water. The children followed us toward town. I felt like a pied piper.



We hired motorcycle taxis to take us to the edge of town...the edge of the water. Gonayiv is still underwater. At some places, it is calf-deep, at other places, knee-deep. In some areas of town – like where the Fonkoze branch is located – it remains chest-deep. We boarded a very large truck high off the ground so it could make it through the flooded streets. We arrived at the location where the branch manager of Fonkoze Gonayiv had gathered many of the branch employees. 25 employees were present.

One by one, we listened to their stories. Every single employee present lost everything they owned. While all but two rented their homes, the doors and windows of those homes flew off in the torrent of water that descended on Gonayiv, as they fled to their roofs, all their belongings were swept away.

One employee had a baby that was six days old, and died in the flood. Another was born in the midst of the crisis and died. The mother is seriously ill. And yet another employee's wife has given birth. We are trying to get them out of Gonayiv.

I noticed one of the employees wearing two completely different shoes. When I asked him about that, he said he found the shoes in the waters. The other employees had no shoes. Their feet were full of oozing sores and seemed to be infected. After all, they are walking around Gonayiv in waters filled with human waste and dead animals.

Of the two employees that actually owned their homes – those substantial enough to survive the flood – they estimated that close to 30 people were taking refuge at their house.

The story of these 25 people. It is the story of Gonayiv today.

After Tropical Storm Jeanne four years ago, we were able to give Fonkoze employees affected by the storm funds to help them rebuild their homes and lives. But, this crisis is much more extensive. Today, I was only able to give each employee U.S. \$250 each, with the promise that perhaps more would come. They kept saying how appreciative they were that I had made the trip to meet with them...how they appreciated the sacrifice I had made. And, I kept saying, no, no...it is you who has sacrificed.

As we waded back to truck we saw four people dragging a woman through the water and yelling to a policeman for help. The policeman indicated to the crowd that he would help...that is, until he realized this woman was dead. Sadly, he told the group he had to prioritize the living, and there was nothing he could do to help. It seems this woman was living on her roof the past few days, and she had no access to food or water, and could not survive.

From what I could discern, the U.N. has been able to distribute water. But, the food relief (from the U.S. ship and other agencies) has not yet been distributed. From my conversations with one of the relief organizations, they are grappling with how to distribute the food without causing panic among the starving people. I don't understand why this is happening. Don't relief agencies have experience with the challenge of starving and desperate people?

The people of Gonayiv are living in the hills, some coming down during the day to literally dig out the mud from their houses with their bare hands. Some are barely clothed, and many are covered with mud from head to toe. As we left town, it began to downpour rain. The desperate people of Gonayiv ran back to the hills."

