

Jehovah's Witnesses' relief efforts in Haiti highlight international unity

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Dr. Mattias attends a victim. Photo Matt Grossman

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EXCLUSIVE FOR DOMINICAN TODAY

Santo Domingo- When a woman in Haiti accepted a study of the Bible from one of Jehovah's Witnesses, she may have expected it to improve her life. Little did she know, it would literally save her life.

Reports indicate that this woman's Bible study teacher literally sacrificed her own life to shield her from the death-dealing debris during the magnitude 7.0 earthquake on January 12th.

After the quake, the student was transported to the branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Santo, near Port-au Prince, Haiti, where acts of compassion and kindness were taking place on an even larger scale.

In cooperation with local authorities and other relief agencies, the Witnesses organized to help care for the immediate needs of their fellow worshippers and other victims in Haiti. At 2:30 am, Thursday, January 14, Witness truck drivers from their branch office here in

the Dominican Republic were off to the border with 15,000 pounds of relief supplies. They were some of the first on the scene. They continued to send shipments of 30,000 pounds of food and medicine supplies every few days.

After having spent 24 hours on a non-stop relief effort just days after the disaster, one of the workers, a witness missionary in Santo Domingo said, "We arrived back to our home at 2 am very exhausted." He continued, "We wouldn't have it any other way. Hard work is for our benefit. It makes us stronger and more satisfied! It is a privilege to care for the emergency needs of our dear brothers in Haiti."

A group of Witness Dominican doctors and medical personnel began to arrive in less than 24 hours after the quake. Among this group of 19 were an orthopedic surgeon, a general surgeon and other medical disciplines. They courageously worked long 15 – 20 hour days under primitive conditions for a week, until relieved by a medical team from France and Europe under the direction of the NGO Aide Afrique, an organization of witnesses who volunteer and donate to provide humanitarian Aid thru-out Africa. This was the first occasion where they have been used in the western world.

On Wednesday, January 20, the same day that a powerful 6.1 aftershock struck a village west of Port-au-Prince, groups of French- and Creole-speaking Witnesses from around the world volunteered to join the relief effort.

These groups, including the group Aide Afrique brought with them two surgeons, a trauma paramedic, twelve nurses, a mid-wife and many other medical professionals as well as 5,000 pounds of medicine and equipment including a mobile surgical suite, enabling them to begin assisting critically injured victims immediately and over 55 emergency surgeries were performed on site.

The Assembly Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses in Santo, Republic of Haiti, remained intact after the quake and served as a temporary clinic and medical center for the injured. Three Kingdom Halls in the affected area are being used similarly, with local Haitian Witnesses who are doctors providing medical attention.

Teams of witnesses from France, Germany, Switzerland, United States, Guadalupe and elsewhere cared for hundreds of patients, witness and non-witness alike. No one was turned away. This assistance proved invaluable, since several hospitals in Haiti were destroyed by the quake and the remaining area hospitals were overwhelmed.

Critical care patients have been transported by volunteers to hospitals in the Dominican Republic. In total, 81 critical care patients were cared for in the Dominican Republic by the same team of Dominican doctors who were the First Responders during that first week after the Earthquake in Haiti.

Most of these patients survived and are well on the way to recovery. One such patient, a boy named Wesley, appears to have been left as an orphan after the quake. His right leg has been amputated and he still suffers from wounds both physical and psychological. But when he receives visits from his Witness friends – families from Canada and the US who learned Creole in efforts to reach the hearts of Haitians – his eyes light up. A smile on the face of such a pained child is hard to forget.

Referring to the efforts of the Witnesses here in the Dominican Republic, Ray Guinn, one of Jehovah's Witnesses from the US volunteering as a Bible teacher in the Dominican Republic, says, "Many hands make the load light. So, the congregations in our area are all pulling together."

As Guinn recalls helping an injured fellow worshipper get into an ambulance, he laments, "The hard part was not the lifting her, the hard part was watching the tears roll down her face." She reeled in pain, but gained some comfort when

Guinn shared a Bible scripture with her. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she cried.

Witness volunteers seem to agree that they gain real satisfaction, not only by assisting their neighbors with practical help, but also by providing knowledge of the

Bible's hope for the future and its answer to the question that millions are left asking: "Why?"

Witnesses Neil and Rebecca Collingbourne have aided many of the Haitians in Dominican Republic hospitals, even providing temporary shelter for some affected by the quake. When asked how they feel about the work they did, they cite the words of Jesus himself, "There is more happiness in giving, than there is in receiving."

There are an estimated 10,000 of Jehovah's Witnesses who lived in the disaster area. Today, 6 weeks after this tragedy of epic proportions and with only a few weeks until the rainy season, a reported 700,000 people are living out in the open in makeshift shelters. Efforts are being made to provide adequate transitional housing. Pre-fabricated wood and tin structures are being prepared to be assembled on-site for the approximately 5000 witnesses that have lost their homes.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Haiti are comforted and strengthened by the loving concern shown by their fellow worshippers around the world. The Witnesses' international relief efforts are currently being coordinated by the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses from the world headquarters in Brooklyn with the assistance of the branch office in the Dominican Republic, providing practical help and spiritual comfort for the victims.

The cost of this Jehovah's Witnesses' relief work is, as always, cared for by funds donated anonymously to the Witnesses' worldwide work.

While the recent disaster in Haiti has shed more light on the work of Jehovah's Witnesses, they have been actively promoting Bible education in Haiti for over 80 years. Perhaps, the next time one of Jehovah's Witnesses approaches and offers a free study of the Bible, we each have reason to wonder: How might this organization save my life?

Written by: **Donald Elwell, Byron Smith**