

HUMAN RIGHTS AFTERSHOCKS: HAITI

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A SURVIVOR'S STORY

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*Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Guests and Panelists,
St. Thomas Community,*

It is my distinct pleasure today to stand here at St. Thomas University in this sixth annual symposium as a survivor of the human tragedy that took place in Haiti on January 12, 2010. On behalf of my Haitian brothers and sisters, I want to extend my deepest thanks to all of you who put your efforts together to make this symposium possible; especially, the *Intercultural Human Rights Law Review* members, faculty members, and my fellow classmates.

My name is Erinece Saint Jean, and I am from Haiti. I received my law degree from the State University of Haiti. I recently arrived in the United States, in July 2010, in order to further my education by participating in the Master of Laws degree program in Intercultural Human Rights, here at St. Thomas University School of Law.

On January 12, 2010, at 4:53 in the afternoon, all of our lives in Haiti were changed. In less than a minute, my nation was devastated by a catastrophic earthquake of a magnitude of 7.0 which killed

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over 250,000 human beings, left 1.5 million internally displaced persons, thousands of orphans, thousands of destroyed houses, including the national palace, all the ministries' buildings, schools, hospitals, churches and so on. Many dreams were vanished, many projects unrealized.

The massive destruction and the resulting human tragedy, still present today, is beyond anything we could have ever imagined. Unfortunately, I experienced the happenings of that day. *I will never forget the day where I was shocked by the darkness of the nature that covered the sky of Haiti and the terror of human suffering.*

Right before my eyes, in my arms, I watched those that I loved take their very last breath, as whispers of good-bye filled the air. I can still feel the touch of their hands on mine.

When I first felt the shake, it took me some seconds to realize that it was an earthquake. At that time, all of us were shocked, we tried very hard to make phone calls, but unfortunately, all the national communication systems in Haiti were not functioning. For those of us in Haiti who had access to internet or television via satellite signal, we were able to hear from CNN that the capital city of Haiti, Port-au-Prince, was destroyed.

After hearing that news, every one of us was captivated by the thought of family members, good friends, or at least someone that we knew in Port-au-Prince.

When I arrived in Port-au-Prince, I was completely shocked by seeing so many dead bodies all across the streets. That same day, some friends and I started to help people who were in desperate need; made several trips back and forth from Port-au-Prince to the central plateau, which is about 45 miles north from the capital city, transporting injured people to different hospitals in that region, run by Partners in Health/Zanmi Lasante. During those trips, *I witnessed so much human suffering, pain and perishing of human life.*

After transporting as many patients as we could during several days, I went to my home town Boucan Carré to participate in the funerals of many good friends, and extended family members of mine who died during the quake.

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While I was thinking about returning to Port-au-Prince to help more, I had a phone call from a dear friend of mine who lives in North Palm Beach Florida, Nancy Anderson, the president of Hands Together of the Palm Beaches, an organization who had been involved in providing relief to people in Gonaïves after this town has been devastated by the hurricanes of 2004. She told me:

Erinece, my friend, I just made a trip to Haiti with my husband and a couple of health care professionals immediately after the quake but we didn't have a chance to be in touch with you by e-mails and we couldn't reach you on the phone. Now, I have a priest from the United States arriving in Haiti with a group of doctors, they need someone to lead them; could you please join them?

I said: "Nancy, I want to join them right now, just tell me where they are." I left my house in 20 minutes after I talked to her because my bag was already packed and my heart ready to go.

When I met the group, we set up our base at Foyer Saint Camille's Hospital, which is located a few miles north from the main city. We increased our team, having professionals running ambulances around Port-au-Prince, including all the corners of Cité Soleil.

Even though it was several days after the earthquake, we still found people who were severely wounded, with broken legs, broken arms who did not yet have any chance to see a doctor. We were their only long-awaited-for hope.

We ran into many complicated cases that needed immediate intervention, so we took them to St. Damian Hospital, many of them requiring immediate amputations.

It was terrible to see babies less than two years old, pregnant women, elderly people getting out from the surgery rooms with amputated legs or arms or sometimes both. What a horror!

We all suffered with them, everywhere in Haiti did, and many of you as well.

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For more than two hundred years, the government and all regulating offices of Haiti were centralized in the capital city of Port-au-Prince. This centralization is the main cause of massive migration from rural areas to Port-au-Prince. As a result, the effects of the earthquake immediately brought the entire country to a standstill.

Prior to January 12, 75% of the Haitian people did not have access to even the basic human needs. Their rights to food, drinking water, and health care are not guaranteed. Basic education was not afforded to 50% of the Haitian children. No doubt, today the misery is beyond numbers.

The Haitian government could absolutely not provide a timely and a sufficient response to that disaster. All government systems were completely down. Almost all the physical government structures had collapsed and the presence of the Haitian Government was barely visible; neither in the media nor on the streets. The government's response was inexistent.

The biggest problem that Haiti has faced, from day one until today, is the *absence of coordination and the lack of leadership* - with regard to the immediate response of medical teams arriving in Haiti and also with regard to the long-term response to alleviate the massive sufferings of people who lack clean water, food, sanitation, safety, respect, and dignity.

I am telling you, if you make a trip to Haiti today, nine months after the quake, you will think that the earthquake happened a week ago. Very little debris has been removed from the city, people are still suffering to the extreme. So many students, teachers, and school owners have passed away in that tragedy. Most of the school buildings have been collapsed. People put some schools back to work under tarps or big trees around the city.

The living conditions in the tent cities of the displaced persons are extremely inhumane, degrading, and revolting. People are in desperate need for food, drinking water, health care, shelter, and security.

I have personally seen women living under the broken tarps in Port-au-Prince, delivering babies, caring for them, and sometimes,

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under the raining water, they had to stand up, holding their babies for more than two hours.

I am tired of hearing that women are still being raped because of the way they are packed under the tents. I am tired of hearing that children and women are being exploited because of the post-earthquake situation. I am tired of reading about child trafficking on the borders of Haiti as a post-earthquake consequence.

But, we Haitians are a strong people and we are not tired of life: we still aspire for the best.

Today, the epidemic of cholera continues to stir fear within the Haitian families. For the past two weeks, it has killed more than 300 people and affected more than 150,000. Again, the government is unable to give an effective response.

This is a very difficult time for my country, and now more than ever, we must work together to make changes for a better way of life for the Haitian people. I believe that it is our duty to serve as their advocates.

Thankfully, there are many people and organizations, large and small, who are working tirelessly for the benefit of the Haitian people. They have saved thousands of lives, they have shown solidarity with my people, they have walked with us in these hard times, and they are continuing to support us. However, I believe that we must continue to speak up for the voiceless, to demand justice and dignity for them. We have to urge the Haitian government and the international commission that have the responsibility for the rebuilding of Haiti to ensure that rights and dignity of the Haitian people are being respected.

A friend in need is a friend indeed!

Today, we want friends from all over the world to partner with us, work in solidarity with us in order to improve the living conditions of those people by helping them to help themselves: charity is a only a temporary good; we need empowerment.

As one of my people, I want to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to each and everyone, from all over the

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world, for all they have done for my fellow Haitians. Without their support, my country and my people would be suffering, imagine: you have eased our pain and our sorrow. Thanks!

As a Haitian, I commit myself to be involved not only in the physical reconstruction of Haiti but also, I make my commitment to be part of the construction of a new mentality of the Haitian people.

Today, at this symposium, St. Thomas University School of Law reiterates its commitment to advocate for the Haitians who are facing so many challenges nowadays in their lives. I believe this symposium, in one sense or another, will be fruitful for Haiti and I thank you for that.

God bless you!

God bless Haiti and its stoic people!