

UNICEF and its partners working to keep Haiti's children safe

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Port-au-Prince, Haiti – As the one month anniversary of the January 12 earthquake approaches, thousands of children in Haiti remain at risk of hunger, malnutrition and childhood diseases. Sadly, many children are also at risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

People engaged in the trafficking and abuse of children take advantage of the chaos that ensues after a major disaster to exploit vulnerable children who may be unaccompanied, orphaned, or otherwise separated from their families. It is imperative that these children be found, fed, cared for and protected. In a country with almost a half million orphans before the earthquake, the risk for children has only increased since then.

UNICEF is now working with several partners on the ground including Save the Children, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Government of Haiti, to implement a child protection system that identifies, registers and protects unaccompanied children. The interagency initiative is already being rolled out in areas directly affected by the earthquake and in locations with high concentrations of displaced people who have moved out of the emergency zones.

Together, the partners form a child protection network that registers unaccompanied children and collects standardized information from hubs around the country that is then used to start the family tracing process. The network works closely with community leaders from local NGOs who are best able to identify and gain the trust of children who might be unaccompanied.

Jennifer Morgan, Project Coordinator for the child protection initiative, explains that the system works by fostering coordination between the humanitarian partners, government and community leaders. Since 2005, the jointly-led system has been used in 15 countries including Indonesia after the tsunami and in Myanmar after the 2008 typhoon.

When unaccompanied children are found and registered, UNICEF and its partners ensure they are given shelter and care in a safe and secure space with access to psychosocial support. The network will then begin work on family tracing to reunify unaccompanied children with their immediate or extended family members. "Children have a right to be with their families," said Morgan. "That is why it is so important to allow the reunification process to run its course."

In addition to starting the identification and registration process, UNICEF and its partners have established a special residential care centre for unaccompanied children in Haiti so that they receive the necessary physical and emotional support during family tracing and reunification.

UNICEF and its humanitarian partners are also using the unaccompanied children identification and registration system to work with the Government of Haiti on strengthening the overall national child protection system. This is a reflection of UNICEF's commitment to not simply rebuilding Haiti, but to helping the country transform into something better for the next generation of Haitians.

*** Photo Legend*

- 1) *Young boy seen standing in the road on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince.*