

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

HAITI

FACING OFF THE FLOODS: DELIVERING LIFESAVING AID TO HURRICANE-AFFECTED CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Fernando Thermidor has the look of a toddler who is 'all cried out' as he buries his tear-stained face in his mother's shoulder. But this is no ordinary two-year-old's temper tantrum. Fernando and his mother, Judith, are crammed like sardines into a schoolroom in Gonaives, where they have taken refuge from flash floods along with nearly 200 other people. "We have been sleeping here for the past week. We had to run out of our house with only the clothes on our backs when the water rose," says Judith. She uses one hand to show the level of the water in their house: mid-thigh.

One after another, in only three weeks' time, Hurricanes Faye, Gustav, Hanna and Ike have battered Haiti. Flash flooding in the wake of the hurricanes has affected 800,000 people all over the country. In Gonaives alone, some 70,000 people were living in makeshift shelters like Jubilee National School, where Fernando's family is staying. The residents were hungry and thirsty for long days as they were tired after slogging through the fetid, muddy water that filled the streets. And the work to clean the thick mud now clogging the streets will take several months before life can return to normal in the city.

UNICEF and its partners have been able to set up temporary water supply systems and to facilitate the cleaning of schools in the city devastated by the flooding. Everyone has to work quickly because rampant problems could turn into real crisis if not addressed adequately. As the residents of Gonaives have stayed for several weeks in shelters with dreadful sanitary conditions, the risk of epidemics has increased. These will help fend off thirst – as well as the waterborne diseases that are the major killers of children in the aftermath of an emergency like this one, in which large numbers of people are forced to live at close quarters without proper sanitation.

Partners in feeding centres were witnessing an increased number of children and women admitted for malnutrition since the beginning of the global food crisis last year. The four hurricanes have only added to an already existing problem forcing all partners in Gonaives, as well as in the rest of the country, to step up their nutrition activities.

Before the city is rebuilt and the population can return to a normal life, humanitarian needs are still pressing and the population remains vulnerable. In these circumstances, children and women are the most vulnerable of all being exposed to all forms of abuse during distributions and in the overcrowded shelters.

The schoolyard here at Jubilee National School looks smaller and smaller as thousands of people emerge from the classrooms where they have taken shelter. Nearly half of those getting in line are children. Many of them are wearing rags; the luckiest of them sport brightly coloured T-shirts that were only slightly ragged when this ordeal began. All are covered in mud. The line inches forward. One child, one woman, one man at a time, each person walks away with an armload of clean water, hygiene supplies and high-energy biscuits.

"I came here today so my family could eat, so they could drink water," says Sender Doristil, a boy who looks about 10 years old. With four other children at home, including a newborn baby, his mother couldn't join him in line. Still, Sender's family is one of the lucky ones. Their house, while flooded, is still standing and the family was able to move up onto the rooftop, where they've built a makeshift tent.

It is hard not to wonder how the misery inflicted by these four hurricanes will exacerbate the deprivation in which most Haitians already live.

"Haiti is already the poorest country in the western hemisphere. It's a country that struggles to get its head above the murky water left behind by years of corruption and violence, and a country where food shortages led to violent riots as recently as last April," says Nils Kastberg, UNICEF's Americas and Caribbean Regional Director, "for it to be affected by four consecutive hurricanes in such a short time seems more than unfair."

But 10-year-old Sender Doristil, who has just received an armload of water, food and essential hygiene supplies, is clearly not thinking about questions of fairness. He carries his load with great care and with his head held high, proud to be bringing lifesaving help back to his family.