Protecting Survivors of Human Trafficking and Violence in Northeastern Haiti

Northeastern Haiti has long been known as a transit point for human trafficking. After the January 2010 earthquake, more than 10,000 Haitians moved to northeastern Haiti or crossed into the Dominican Republic illegally, placing themselves at risk of involuntary servitude, slavery, debt bondage and prostitution. Survivors of human trafficking and deportation are particularly vulnerable, especially women and children, who are often the targets of sexual and gender-based violence.

To prevent and respond to trafficking and violence, Catholic Relief Services partnered with the Sisters of St. Jean and Caritas Fort Liberté. One aspect of the project involved opening a safe house in Ouanaminthe, Haiti. The safe house offers protection to survivors of human trafficking and violence. Residents receive shelter, food, clothing, medical care, psychosocial and spiritual support, legal assistance and transportation while Haitian authorities process their cases and partners trace families to arrange for reunifications. The safe house can accommodate 30 people at a time. Two full-time staff members take care of residents and monitor their progress in close coordination with project staff. The Ouanaminthe safe house began to assist survivors in June 2010 and has intervened in more than 175 cases as of November 2011.

“You have created employment, you fight against [sexual and gender-based violence]…. You carry out work for victims, children…. The safe house is so important.”
—Government Commissioner, Fort Liberté

At the community level, the project aims to change the attitudes and behaviors that allow human trafficking and violence to persist. Before the project, few survivors sought services or pressed charges against perpetrators. Local authorities routinely dismissed cases that involved trafficking or sexual and gender-based violence. Parents unwittingly consigned their children to slavery by allowing traffickers to smuggle young people across the border. Since April 2010, more than 60 community members and partners completed training sessions on interviewing survivors and coordinating their efforts. Staff members were surprised by how quickly people embraced their message. Law enforcement and the courts are beginning to take appropriate actions, and survivors from all denominations are accessing services as never before.

These achievements complement CRS’ efforts to establish a referral network for sexual and gender-based violence in Haiti. Looking ahead, CRS plans to follow up with Haitian communities that have received support, invest in more advertisement opportunities to reach a larger audience, work with teachers to develop an early warning system for at-risk students, include more men and boys in sensitization programs and promote livelihood activities to improve adults’ options. Altogether, these efforts will help Haitians stem the tide of human rights abuses along the border.