

Volunteers Deliver Food to Damaged Convent School in Haiti

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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It is more than two months since the earthquake devastated Haiti and there is little sign of rebuilding. Tzu Chi volunteers continue to find communities desperate for food and support and provide whatever help they can.

One was the College of St. Francois, half-way up one of the mountains that surround Port-au-Prince. Its two five-storey dormitories were destroyed by the quake. Three of the nuns insist on staying in the derelict building, while the other seven nuns, and the families of the students, are living in tents. The nuns said that, in these difficult conditions, their priority was to rebuild the school, so that the children can continue their education. The best the volunteers could do was to donate enough kidney beans, rice and food for 10 days; they said they came with the blessing of Tzu Chi members around the world.

A Swedish volunteer read a letter from Master Cheng Yen, who expressed her heart-felt compassion. Then the volunteers prayed together with the nuns and the students: "let us pray for people, all the Haitian people, to recover as soon as possible." Sister St. Charles, the principal of the school, expressed their gratitude: "you are very kind. The world has a lot of kind people. Tzu Chi is a very good example. Your kindness makes us feel that people thousands of miles away care about us."

The volunteers went on to another convent, St Marie, which has 10 schools and several clinics in the Port-au-Prince area. Two of the nuns died in the earthquake; the 46 who survived wonder how they can rebuild. Reliant on donations from the public, the nuns have only 10 days of food left. The volunteers arranged to return the next day with food, to help the nuns get through this difficult period.

Then, accompanied by a local volunteer named Daniel Georges, the volunteers visited the Sisters of St Anne convent near the capital. Built over 50 years ago, the buildings could not withstand the force of the quake. A dozen schools and two clinics were destroyed; the smell of rotting flesh pervaded the buildings. The volunteers walked over the rubble of what used to be a school and felt the pain and grief of the nuns. But food was their most urgent need, and the first step toward recovery.



Scenes of desperation

The team also visited cities outside the capital and found similar scenes of desperation. In Leogane, a city of 200,000 people, they visited a nursing school; the principal suggested that they organize a free clinic, to alleviate the urgent need for medical services. "We are a Buddhist charity organization and are interested in rebuilding the medical system for remote areas in the mid- and long term," said one volunteer. They found that a field outside the nursing school had become a large refugee camp; the tents are all the people have to call home. In the tight and

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crowded spaces, children washed clothes and women dried them. Somehow, they survive.

At the invitation of a local priest, the volunteers also went to Cabaret, a coastal town on the outskirts of the capital. He went to Tzu Chi's headquarters in Port-au-Prince several times to ask for help on behalf of his impoverished parishioners. The volunteers found the residents so desperate for food that they search for it among the gravel on the ground. Puzzled, they asked for an explanation and learnt that the only factory in the town had produced food; it had stacks of wheat at the time of the quake. The factory was destroyed and the wheat was scattered on the ground. Humans and animals sift the soil in the hope of finding wheat. "They collect it to sell to people to give to chickens," said a volunteer translator named Robomson. "This way they can make money with it." It is over two months since the quake – and this is the way people have to live.