

## Volunteers Help Stricken Convent in Haiti

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It is hard to see how life can get worse for the 65 nuns of the St Teresa convent in the Haitian city of Carrefour, one hour from the capital, Port-au-Prince. The earthquake on January 12 killed four of their sisters, destroyed their school and damaged their main building. They live in permanent fear of its collapse. On their second visit, Tzu Chi's volunteers brought them aid and as much spiritual support as they could.

Before the quake, Carrefour was already a huge slum. It is close to the epicenter of the quake and sustained enormous damage. Its residents are living on the edge of survival. They wash their clothes in a stream that runs through the city and lay them out to dry on the ground, where they will soon get dirty again. In April, the stream will become a raging torrent, with the onset of the rainy season; the water will reach the height of a two-storey building. In French, 'carrefour' means 'crossroads', a good description of how the residents feel; living below the poverty line before the quake, they do not know where to go next.

The nuns came to Carrefour to help relieve the residents of their suffering. Their convent is at the top of a small hill; four bed sheets by the side of the road mark the entrance. They too face an uncertain future. The quake killed four sisters and destroyed their school, which has become a pile of rubble. To rebuild it would cost US\$47,000, money which the sisters do not have. Their main building was damaged but still useable. The old living room is full of beds, because it is safer than the dormitory. But a shortage of space forces many to sleep there, but they do not lie directly under the beams. The corridor on the second floor is also full of beds. "Above the ceiling is a tin roof," said Sister Lops. "It is lighter than concrete, so that, even if it falls, at least it will not be so serious. If it is very windy, the rain comes in, but most of the time it is liveable." Sister Yanine, who is 77, could not bear to see the younger sisters sleeping outside; she gave up her own bed and moved into a tent in the courtyard. "My knees are bad, so it hurts when I bend over. There is nothing to be done. I just have to put up with it." The heat, even at night, is unbearable.

The nuns were steadfast and took the problems in their stride. "The earthquake was the force of nature," said Sister Yanine. "You cannot say that God wanted to punish us. It was us not looking after the environment. We need faith in God." The volunteers, who were making their second visit, understood well the plight of the sisters. They delivered enough food, tents and other supplies to keep them going for three weeks. Rather than give a large amount of aid, which may be stolen by thieves, they decided to make regular trips to replenish the stocks. They prayed with the nuns. "Let us sincerely pray for a world free of disasters. May there be peace on earth and no suffering. Praise the Lord, Praise Him for giving me life." The sisters were surprised to learn that [Master Cheng Yen](#), the founder of Tzu Chi, is also a woman. She is, like them, a nun. Although nuns and volunteers belong to different religions and speak different languages, they shared a common spirit – a spirit of harmony that pervaded the convent, despite the misery all around them.

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