

# 'Life Is Back'

## Haiti moves haltingly to reopen schools

By **Gina Chon**  
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PORT-AU-PRINCE—Haiti will reopen some of the country's schools Monday for the first time since the Jan. 12 earthquake, but few are in the capital or other hard-hit areas.

No one knows how long children in those places will go without schooling. Many schools might not open until the fall, said Pierre Michel Laguerre, director general of Haiti's Education Ministry. But with an untold number of children having lost one or both parents, and almost all needing a distraction from the horrors they have witnessed, resuming school has become an urgent priority.

"It gives those traumatized children the feeling that life is back," said Elisabeth Byrs, a United Nations spokeswoman, "and it helps."

There also is a longer-range imperative. "Haiti can't have a future without educated children," said Mr. Laguerre. "But there has been so much destruction, it's a big and unprecedented challenge for us."

The education ministry and the U.N. on Monday plan to begin assessing the state of schools in Port-au-Prince, as well hard-hit areas south and west of the city, and areas now home to large numbers of people displaced from the city, according Ms. Byrs.

As many as 8,000 schools that served 1.8 million children have been destroyed or damaged in the Port-au-Prince area alone, according to the U.N. Mr. Laguerre said all of the schools on the western side of the city were totally destroyed, while 40 percent in the south were severely damaged. A preliminary U.N. estimate calls for at least 4,000 temporary classrooms.

Children under 18 years old make up almost half of Haiti's population of 9 million. Thousands are believed to have been orphaned. The longer orphans and other vulnerable children stay out of school, said Mr. Laguerre, the more likely they are to fall prey to misery or abuse. They could become street children, he said, or child traffickers or other adults could exploit them; for example, some adults force street children to beg for them or engage in other money-making activities.

Even for children whose parents both survived, the numerous aftershocks—some as severe as 6.1 magnitude—have kept many Haitian children in almost constant terror. And almost all are burdened with gruesome memories. In the days following the temblor, it was virtually impossible to avoid seeing dead bodies piled up on the streets, some of them being burned.

The school buildings themselves also hold traumatic memories. Many schools were in the second half of split sessions when the

earthquake hit, and many surviving children escaped buildings as they crumbled or collapsed. Thousands more were trapped and killed in the buildings.

In the outdoor camps, where hundreds of thousands of homeless Haitians are living, the education ministry is considering setting up makeshift schools in tents. It's also considering running schools out of vans for areas where buildings were destroyed or rendered unsafe. Schools will also need furniture, books, uniforms, and other supplies, Mr. Laguerre said, as well as trauma counseling for the students.

National exams normally take place in June, but it's unclear whether they can be held on time this year. The ministry is trying to gradually open schools throughout the rest of the school year.

Meanwhile, ministry committees are trying to gather information on teachers and students who have died, been displaced or moved to the provinces, and to coordinate with the international community.

"We are trying to assess our needs," said Mr. Laguerre, who added he didn't have an estimate of how much the school rebuilding effort would cost. "We need very, very much money."

Because the public school system is considered poor by many Haitians, 85% of Haiti's schools are private. But now many of those schools lack the financial and human resources to function properly, if at all.

Mr. Laguerre said the ministry isn't distinguishing between public and private, saying the only concern is to "educate Haiti's children."

In the capital's teeming tent cities, many Haitians are still struggling to survive and so are not yet thinking about their children's education. Marcellus Belavoir, 44, said residents in his camp in the Petionville area of the city have not discussed organizing informal classes for the kids. "We have so much to worry about that school is not the first thing on my mind," he said.

Still, Mr. Belavoir said he worries about how missing school will affect his 10-year-old daughter, Maya, in the long term. When the earthquake hit, she cowered in a corner of the school playground with two friends. Mr. Belavoir came to find her, but then he had to break the news that her mother had died in the earthquake.

Since Maya moved to the tent city, she's bored, she said, and doesn't really have any friends. She misses her mother and doesn't know where her classmates or teachers are. "I want to go back to school and see my friends," Maya said, "but I don't know when I'll go back."

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