



Donna Ecker

Overcrowding in Haiti's capital city of Port-au-Prince is clearly evident, with rows of shacks piled one on top of another.

Haiti is a land filled with the 'cries of the poor'

By Donna Ecker
Guest contributor

It has been close to 14 months now since the democratically elected president of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was deposed and sent into exile.

The coup d'etat was accomplished by the crushing power of the military, the only true power in Haiti. They rule by violence, repression and intimidation, something foreign to us in this country and therefore hard for us to imagine.

I made a trip to Haiti, a land of contrasts and extremes, in the first week of September. Traveling with me was my husband, Tom, Dr. Michael Mirwald and his son, Jason, a recent graduate of St. Bonaventure University.

Our trip had more than one purpose.

We had made arrangements to spend a week with a young Haitian named Maiz. The Mirwald family has for five years tried to move mountains to adopt Maiz and bring him to our country, but to no avail. Our government wants no more Haitians on this soil. One of our objectives was to get Maiz into a school, offering him the slightest chance at a future in this poverty-stricken land.

Another purpose of our trip was to deliver 12 cases of medical supplies we had accumulated for friends serving the Haitian people's health needs.

I had an objective of my own as well. I wanted to find out what has happened to Haiti since the coup. I have made four other trips to this land of disparity, all before the free democratic elections. My hope for Haiti lay in its fledgling democracy and its overwhelmingly favored choice — by 67 percent — for president.

I wanted to see what happened to the dream and the people who believed in that dream. I wanted to be able to bring that information back with me to let others know the dream of freedom has turned into a nightmare of oppression.

I kept a journal while there so as not to forget. The following are excerpts from that journal. I share them to tell the story of a people of poverty, a people of patience, and a people forgotten. Ninety-eight percent of the population lives in poverty, nearly 90 percent are unemployed and starvation is a routine medical condition.

Friday, Sept. 4, 1992: I have the day off today. The hope is to get myself packed and to prepare.

This is never an easy process. Emotionally, it's hard. I am afraid this time. In the back of my mind I know that the situation has worsened since I was there last. I don't know anymore if the sentiment about North Americans is still positive. Will people



Dr. Paul Blough, 78, of St. Catherine's Hospital in Haiti, delivers 12 to 20 babies every day.

look at me as a representative of American policy? If so, that could put me in danger. I know too that I will face poverty I would rather deny. Seeing the children suffer brings me to utter despair. And yet ... tomorrow we'll begin.

Saturday, Sept. 5: An early start, how about up at 4 a.m. We're taking down 12 suitcases of supplies so we have to be to the airport early. Took care of all of those last-minute details; fed the fish, dropped off the mail, delivered the house keys and said a prayer or two for a safe trip. Got into New York City and changed planes.

The cultural reality began to hit home as we prepared to board the flight for Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Hundreds of Haitians lining up with as many carry-ons as possible. The man in front of me carried a large box of laundry detergent. Interesting what becomes important.

As we joined the slow moving, rambling line, I looked around and saw many others looking at me. Their question seemed obvious, "What was I doing on this plane?" I know keenly the sense of being different. Jason said in my ear, "I've never felt so white."

The flight was pleasant enough, only three hours

from New York. As the captain informed us of our descent, I felt the weight in my stomach.

Descent, as in descent into hell?

I began to dread the airport scene — which is a gruesome experience by any standards. Hundreds of young men are waiting and wanting to procure your attention and to receive American money for moving your bags. They are desperate to work, desperate to feed themselves and their families. How to pick out only one?

As the plane flew over the coast of Haiti, the picture is one of stark contrast. From the air, you can see the barrenness of the mountains, which have been stripped of its trees and topsoil. The trees have gone to make charcoal, the main cooking fuel. But the coastline is beautiful, the water blue-green and sparkling.

As we flew in closer to Port-au-Prince and lower in altitude, the beauty of a tropical island turned ugly. The waters in the port have lost their aquamarine color and are instead gray-brown. Since there is no sewer system in Haiti, raw sewage empties into the harbor.

It was easy to see from the air what damage has been done to the land and the sea. The overcrowding in the capital city is evident, with row upon row of shacks piled one on top of another. The heat and oppressive air seem to lift up from the slums permeating the airplane window I looked out.

I checked the towers as the plane swung around the terminal — no guards in the tower, no army with machine guns as a show of force. That's good. My mother will be happy to know that.

Welcome to Haiti — a land and culture that can teach me so much.

Welcome to a whole other world: the language, the heat, the poverty, the patience of the people, the joyful colors in the midst of black desperation, the eagerness to work, the 80-percent illiteracy rate. All of it meets me and greets me as I walk off the plane, the same way the heat/humidity of 95 slaps my face in welcome.

After an hour of waiting for custom's clearance and an hour of inspection, we are out of the airport with all 15 bags. Sister Ellen Flynn, the director of Norwich House, where we will stay, is there to pick us up. She has Maiz with her and the reunion is thrilling. He will be with us all week. How wonderful!

After settling in, we sat with Maiz and Sr. Ellen to talk about what's been going on. I commented to Sr. Ellen that driving up the streets things did not appear to be any different. She shared with me her concerns about that.

"There is a facade of normality here. And yet, underneath, the reality is the violence has increased

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