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Hopes and fears for Haiti

Hope and despair are waging a fierce battle for the soul of Haiti, according to local residents concerned about the Western Hemisphere's most impoverished nation.

In the wake of recent unrest in Haiti, Catholic News Service recently reported that Caritas Internationalis, a Vatican-headquartered umbrella organization of worldwide Catholic aid organizations, has launched an appeal for more than \$1 million to help feed hungry Haitians. Among Caritas' members is Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' humanitarian agency.

According to CNS, Caritas announced in a March 15 statement that "The instable situation in (the capital city of) Port-au-Prince continues to prevent the safe delivery of humanitarian aid, leaving children hungry at orphanages and other Caritas feeding centers."

A rebellion ultimately forced the Feb. 29 resignation of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had led the nation since 2001, as well as from 1990-91 and 1994-96. With Aristide in exile, international peacekeepers are trying to stabilize the country. Caritas said food security was a major issue around the time of Aristide's departure.

"Roadblocks had prevented the transport of food and other goods ... Hundreds of thousands of Haitians remain without adequate medical treatment or food," the agency said.

A DIOCESAN VIEW

The plight of Haiti's people amid this political crisis is a major concern for members of the Diocese of Rochester with ties to the Caribbean nation.

Father William Spilly, pastor of St. John the Evangelist



Reuters/CNS

Haitians collect tomatoes from scraps thrown out at La Saline market in Port-au-Prince March 18. The Catholic relief group Caritas Internationalis has appealed for \$1 million to help to feed hungry Haitians.

Church on Humboldt Street in Rochester, has visited Haiti five times over the past decade or so. The priest has worked with Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity to serve impoverished Haitians in Port-au-Prince and with several Rochester-area residents in Borgne, a northeastern Haitian city. Borgne, which lies alongside a river, exemplifies Haiti's extreme poverty, he said.

"It's like having a slum on the shores of Lake Ontario near the mouth of the Genesee River," Father Spilly said. "Only a couple of places have a generator for lights. People live in small, one-room-type enclosures. They cook outside with charcoal."

During one of his visits to Borgne, Father Spilly recalled

that he was asked to preside at a funeral for someone whose family couldn't afford a coffin in which to bury their deceased relative.

One of the organizations Father Spilly has worked with is Haiti Outreach — Pwoje Espwa (Creole for "Project Hope") or H.O.P.E. — a Rochester-based not-for-profit that originated at Corpus Christi Church but is now an independent group. Since 1995, H.O.P.E. has been providing technical, educational and financial support to Borgne in the areas of health, education and economic development.

H.O.P.E. is headed by Rose-Marie Chierici, a Haitian native who lives in Rochester. Like Caritas International, Chierici expressed concern

about the Haitian people's hunger amid the current civil unrest.

"Borgne was tense, but there was no rioting or things like that," Chierici said, noting, however, that H.O.P.E. health workers have almost run out of medications. "The most important point is that food is getting scarce and it's getting to a critical level," she said. With the price of a gallon of gasoline at \$5 in the Borgne region, where the average annual income is about \$200 a year, traveling to food markets has become financially prohibitive, Chierici noted.

It also has become difficult for H.O.P.E. volunteers to travel to Haiti. Sarah Brownell, who has volunteered at Rochester's St. Joseph's House

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