

AI Index: PRE 01/105/2010
24 March 2010

Haiti's emergency response must include protection from sexual violence

(Port-au-Prince) Thousands of women living in temporary camps around Haiti are threatened by sexual violence and have inadequate protection from any authorities, Amnesty International said today after concluding a three-week visit to the country.

Sexual violence is widespread across the hundreds of spontaneous camps that sprung up in the capital and other affected areas of Haiti following the massive earthquake that struck the country in January.

Amnesty International said that the lack of measures to prevent and respond adequately to the threat of sexual violence is contributing to the humanitarian crisis and urged the Haitian authorities to take immediate and effective measures to curb sexual violence and protect women living in the camps.

“Sexual violence is widely present in camps where some of Haiti’s most vulnerable live,” said Chiara Liguori, Caribbean researcher at Amnesty International from Port-au-Prince. “It was already a major concern in the country before the earthquake but the situation in which displaced people are living exposes women and girls to even greater risks.”

Insecurity, overcrowding and inadequate sanitary facilities are putting women and girls at great risk of abuse because they are exposed and without protection. The lack of capacity of the police forces and the justice system in the aftermath of the earthquake means that perpetrators are unlikely to be punished.

“Authorities in Haiti must prioritize strengthening the police presence in camps, especially at night, including capacity to protect women and girls from sexual violence and to respond adequately to reported cases,” said Chiara Liguori.

There is a general feeling of insecurity inside and around the camps, particularly at night. Women and girls living in makeshift shelters feel vulnerable and are afraid of attacks.

Most victims of sexual violence interviewed by Amnesty International were minors. One 8-year-old girl was raped when alone in her tent at night. Her mother had gone out of the camp to work and did not have anybody to look after her daughter during her absence. A 15-year-old was raped when she went out of the camp to urinate, as there were no latrines within the camp.

Lack of adequate protection mechanisms for women and girls is discouraging them from denouncing the violence. A local women’s organization reported 19 cases of rape in just one small section of Champ-de-Mars, one of the biggest camps in Port-au-Prince. None of the women and girls had reported the attacks to the police for fear of their aggressors and instead moved out of the camp.

“There are no shelters in the country where victims of sexual violence can be protected and have access to services. Shelters for women and girl victims of violence must also be part of the emergency response and the international NGOs, massively present in Haiti, can only make this possible with the coordination of the Haitian authorities,” said Chiara Liguori

Background Information:

Amnesty International’s delegation visited eight camps of displaced people in Port-au-Prince, and the cities of Jacmel and Lascahobas, some of them more than once.

Amnesty International’s delegates met government authorities, including the President of the Republic, René García Préval, and Prime minister, Jean-Max Bellerive. They held talks with the head of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) and with various UN agencies operating in Haiti, local and international human rights organizations and the ambassadors of Brazil, Canada, and France.

For a full copy of Amnesty International’s briefing on the main human rights concerns for women and children in Haiti, please contact our press office.