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UNICEF Seeks to Keep Kids Out of Haiti Orphanages

By Tim Padgett and Jessica Desvarieux / Port-au-Prince

The 10 U.S. missionaries who were arrested in Haiti last month for allegedly abducting children no doubt consider themselves Christian martyrs. When a TIME reporter visited the Idaho Baptists recently in their squalid, rusted jail cells in Port-au-Prince and asked about their predicament, their unsurprising, biblical response was, "The Philistines won, the Philistines won."

On Wednesday, however, a Haitian judge released eight of the missionaries, who according to their lawyers left the country by sunset. Two others — the group's leader, Laura Silsby, and her nanny and assistant, Charisa Coulter — remained behind bars for further investigation, but they may eventually be freed as well. Either way, the question now is whether their high-profile detention has put the fear of God into others who might think it's O.K. to take Haitian kids without lawful process — even if the intent is to give them refuge and more hopeful lives after a disaster as horrific as Haiti's Jan. 12 earthquake. ([See TIME's comprehensive coverage of the earthquake in Haiti.](#))

Marie de la Soudiere wants to make sure that folks like the missionaries don't get many more chances to even try it. As coordinator of the separated-children program in Haiti for UNICEF, the U.N. Children's Fund, de la Soudiere recently initiated a campaign to register Haitian youths, who were among the world's most vulnerable to trafficking even before the quake. The registry will be much like the one crafted in the wake of the tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia in 2004, but its purpose is more far-reaching than reuniting lost kids with relatives. The Haiti list, begun about two weeks ago, is also designed to prevent children from being dumped into the country's scores of loosely monitored orphanages, many of which have long been sources of child trafficking. "Our answer," says de la Soudiere, "is 'no' to orphanages."

That's understandable thinking in Haiti, the western hemisphere's poorest country, where children are frequently given up by their destitute parents. Those kids are all too often funneled to more-affluent families who turn them into slaves, known in Creole as *restaveks*, or to outright traffickers who force them into lives of prostitution in Haiti and abroad. The Haitian government estimates that there are about 300,000 *restaveks* in Haiti today. In many cases before and after the quake, parents and orphanages have delivered

their kids to well-meaning but naive foreigners like the Idaho missionaries, who were collared on Jan. 29 for trying to ferry 33 poor Haitian children in a bus, without proper documents, into the Dominican Republic for eventual adoption in the U.S. ([See children's messages of hope for Haiti.](#))

The missionaries, who insisted that they were doing humanitarian work, were formally charged with kidnapping earlier this month. But lawyers for the eight missionaries who were released on Wednesday say they're confident that those charges will be dropped. (The missionaries were freed without bond and are required to return to Haiti only if asked by a judge in order to answer further questions.) The missionaries' Dominican legal adviser, Jorge Puello, is wanted in both the U.S. and El Salvador on human-smuggling charges. (He denies the accusations.) In an interview with TIME, Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive did not criticize the judge's decision but said the case has at least reminded the world that "we had a disaster here, but we still have laws. We won't accept people trying to take advantage of this disaster to traffic children."

Many — if not most — of those 33 children, it turns out, aren't even orphans; they were given to Silsby's group by desperate parents, either directly or via orphanages. De la Soudiere, a French citizen and veteran child advocate in disaster and war zones, believes the Haitian children's registry will make people like orphanage directors and clueless missionaries "think twice" before unlawfully scooping up lost or abandoned kids. "It gives these children a legal identity they didn't have before," she says. "In the end, I also think it will strengthen Haitian family culture, because Haitians have been encouraged for too long to believe that they can't take care of their own children."

The January earthquake, which the Haitian government says killed more than 200,000 people, left thousands of children orphaned or separated from their families. But UNICEF and its partner NGOs in the registry effort, including Save the Children, Catholic Relief Services and Relief International, insist that it's better for aid workers to help identify and make the effort to locate those kids' relatives — and place them in temporary foster-style care with network-monitored and supported families — than to hand them over to orphanages. The vast majority of the children, they say, have an immediate or extended family member out there who is willing to take the child if contacted.

That was the case, for example, with a 6-year-old Haitian boy named Kenzie, who lost his parents in the earthquake. The leg injury he sustained got bad enough that he was sent to the U.S. naval hospital ship *Comfort* for emergency treatment. Doctors might have been inclined to then send Kenzie to an orphanage — until a volunteer Haitian nurse on board, Edith Philistin, who was in contact with the UNICEF project, did some detective work and found the boy's relatives, who have since taken him in. "They thought he was dead [until] I pointed to the big boat in the sea," says Philistin.

This week, Relief International doctors at a field clinic in a hard-hit suburb of the capital encountered a woman who only a few days before had found an infant abandoned in an open-air latrine. The NGO contacted UNICEF, which is registering the baby and conducting a search through various media, like radio,

for her family. What's more, even though the woman who found her is poor, she has been allowed to care for the infant under the UNICEF network's supervision — largely because experts like de la Soudiere says it's often a better option to keep children in their own communities instead of giving them to wealthier families who might make them *restaveks*.

So far, the nascent UNICEF campaign has registered only about 130 Haitian children, but thousands are expected to be in the agency's database before the year's end. Not everyone backs the no-to-orphanages philosophy, of course. Referring to the Idaho missionaries, an American Christian missionary who helps run an orphanage in northern Haiti told TIME this week, "You can't let a few misguided people like them cast a shadow over the genuinely good work others are doing with Haitian children."

That's true; but the UNICEF registry, if it can really reach out to an appreciable number of Haitian kids, could at least show Haitians an alternative to their troubling tradition of discarding children in the face of poverty and all the country's other hardships. Meanwhile, the project may want to add the 33 children the Idaho Baptists tried to carry away. As the case gets resolved, they're being housed in a Haitian orphanage — which to child advocates like de la Soudiere is the real Philistine victory.

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