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guest commentary

They're dying in Haiti; why don't we care?

By Susie Scott Krabacher

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Last week, 26 severely malnourished children died in Haiti. The Associated Press quoted officials there as saying more deaths are imminent unless help comes quickly.

"The situation is extremely, extremely fragile and dangerous," said Max Cosci, who heads the Belgian contingent of Doctors Without Borders in Haiti.

Those of us who work on the ground in Haiti know that this is just the tip of the iceberg. There will be more deaths from starvation, frustration and violence unless we take action immediately.

It's entirely possible that Haiti, known as the "Jewel of the Caribbean" during the '70s and early '80s, could have been a flourishing and independent economic success today. Haiti's acumen in the sugarcane and textile trades and its bewitching allure for adventure-seeking tourists could easily have translated into prosperity.

If not for the rampant corruption in virtually every level of government — especially within the remnants of the judicial system — Haiti could be more like the Dominican Republic, which attracts

more than 4 million tourists annually and has about a 30 percent direct foreign investment rate.

The summer's devastating hurricanes have exacerbated the island nation's plight, wiping out all the crops in many areas. Roads have been washed away, leaving the poorest citizens isolated and without any means of feeding themselves.

As our own economy undulates to a schizophrenic dirge, we've become annoyed with Haiti's clinging to the hope that we will not only give them more cash, but also encourage our foreign friends to do the same.

Here's a thought: Without a functioning judicial system in place to protect foreign investors' assets in Haiti, it's likely that no one will ever invest there. Haiti does not protect the rights of its own, so why would we expect their judicial system to work for any foreigner?

The U.S. has doled out more than \$2.2 billion of USAID grants and loans to Haiti since 1987, when its constitution was ratified. That constitution, incidentally, included a law to protect children in Haiti. Today, still, more than 300,000 Haitian children are held in domestic and sexual slavery. Some will go weeks without any food at all.

I suggest that for every USAID dollar going to Haiti, a meager 5 percent be used to set up a "protectorate" judicial system. Of course, the president and prime minister of Haiti would have to sign on. Internationally, all but the most corrupt nations would support the proposal, since it would help Haiti to become more autonomous.

I don't think America hates Haiti. We hate its indifference to its own people and its arrogance in continuing to demand foreign aid without seriously making efforts to weed out corruption. And the U.S.

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will never trust a country that turns a blind eye to child slavery.

Haiti is 500 miles from Florida — a strategic location, considering that some of the people who are eager to help Haiti, such as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, actually do hate Americans. Poverty breeds frustration. Frustration breeds anger. Anger breeds hate, and hate is the root of all terror.

In addition to Mercy and Sharing's own relief efforts that sustain more than 4,600 children and the elderly in Haiti, we are assisting other organizations on the ground to bring emergency aid, medical treatment and hope to the inhabitants of the hard-hit southeast region. Many children there are not eating for weeks on end. Parents are actually selling a child to pay for food to feed the rest of their family.

As we Americans watch our own crown tilting, it becomes easier to feel disdain than compassion about what happens to Haiti. However, one could argue that between America's strong shoulders there was once a heart that loved Haiti.

Susie Scott Krabacher, founder of Mercy and Sharing (haitichildren.com) based in Aspen, has worked in Haiti for 15 years.

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