

Hope Fades, Grief Sets in Near Fallen Haiti School

Grief Sets In for Neighbors of Fallen Haiti School as Rescuers Abandon Hope for More Survivors

By JONATHAN M. KATZ Associated Press Writer

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PETIONVILLE, Haiti



Residents wait for news of victims and survivors outside 'La Promesse' school collapsed in Petionville, a neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Monday, Nov. 10, 2008. U.S., French and Haitian firefighters used sonar, cameras and dogs to scour the wreckage of the school for signs of life three days after it collapsed, killing about 90 and severely injuring 150 more. (AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa) ▲

From her front porch, Janita Geneus has a clear view of the collapsed school where her daughter was crushed to death along with at least 93 of her classmates and teachers. But she has not looked at the wreckage once.

The mourning 48-year-old mother has barely moved from a thin mattress in her living room since the concrete school collapsed during a party on Friday. She refuses to join the thousands of others who watch rescuers scour the rubble for victims.

The searchers announced Monday they did not expect to find more survivors.

Piles of backpacks and notebooks lie scattered in the gnarled, dusty debris — all that is left of the former three-story school. An ungraded page of English homework found under a piece of broken concrete reads: "I work hard. I study my lessons. I take my bath."

Geneus was at church Friday when her husband rushed up the street on a motorcycle to tell her the College La Promesse had collapsed with three of their five children inside. Eleazar, 9, and Mika, 16, survived with serious injuries. Twelve-year-old Ketura was dead.

"She didn't like that school but I couldn't afford anything else," Geneus said in a whisper. "We lost her because we don't have money."

More than 150 people were badly injured and two houses behind the school were destroyed in the hillside slum of Nerette, a maze of precarious buildings below the wealthy Port-au-Prince suburb of Petionville.

Neighbors had long complained the school was unsafe, and people living nearby have been trying to sell their homes since part of it tumbled down eight years ago.

Now grief is setting in.

Friends and family in white funeral clothes descended a staircase built into the steep hillside to visit the second-story concrete home where Geneus and her husband have lived for 21 years. Some carried limes to ward off the smell of corpses still trapped in the rubble.

They described Ketura as a gregarious, talkative child who loved singing gospel music and studying Haitian history. She wore her hair braided and in photos often posed lying on her side, smiling coyly into the camera.

Her unemployed parents struggled to meet a \$212 yearly tuition bill for each of their children at the school, but Ketura complained that the teachers were not competent.

"Her father promised she could go to another school next year," Geneus said.

Authorities have not been able to say with certainty how many students were inside the building when it collapsed, but the Protestant church school had about 500 regular students.

Some weren't at school because they could not afford the 63-cent tuition to a fundraiser in which students planned to watch movies and were allowed to show up in street clothes instead of the school uniform.

Cherly Louis, a classmate of Mika and Ketura's friend, said about a quarter of her class did not show up that day. She recalled the walls crashing around her just after a class break about 10 a.m., then hurtling through the air toward the ground.

"I fell right out of the building," the 17-year-old said, grimacing in a bed at Port-au-Prince's General Hospital. "I'm very grateful that I'm alive."

Some made it out as the building fell. Nearly all other survivors were found in the frantic first hours by neighbors who leaped on the rubble and dug with their bare hands, sometimes with the help of U.N. peacekeepers. No survivors have been found since the U.S. and French teams arrived Saturday.

"We think the opportunity for anyone to be alive is over," Capt. Michael Istvan, a leader of the Fairfax County, Va.-based team, said Monday.

Thousands of onlookers scrutinized the rescuers' every move from balconies and frustration boiled over after long stretches where nobody could be seen working on the pile.

About 100 Haitians stormed the site Sunday afternoon only to be driven off. They threw rocks at police and U.N. peacekeepers demanding they be allowed to help speed up the rescue process. The situation was calmer Monday as more locals were given jobs participating in the search.

The government has pledged to pay for funerals and compensate the families of the victims, said Steven Benoit, who represents Petionville in Haiti's Chamber of Deputies.

The school's owner and builder, Protestant preacher Fortin Augustin, appeared before a judge Monday as authorities investigated him on suspicion of involuntary manslaughter, police spokesman Garry Desrosier said.

Minister of Justice and Public Security Jean Joseph Exume said the case was still being investigated but the owner could face up to life in prison.

Officials said Augustin was denied a permit to build the school in the 1990s but went ahead with the project during the years of rebellion and government upheaval that followed.

Associated Press Writer Evens Sanon contributed to this report.

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