

Abandoned Babies, Buoys of Distress... !

In Haiti, poverty pushes certain mothers to abandon their newborn. The general hospital does what it can to take care of these children of poverty.

Martine is 19 years old. After a normal delivery, she was forced to abandon her baby. The father didn't want it; the aunt with whom she lives wanted the baby even less because it would mean another mouth she was unable to feed. The young mother from Bainet, with a puffy face and her head covered by a white scarf, choked a sob in leaving the University of Haiti hospital. The thought of the little one she only held for a few hours, before being obligated to abandon her among the other rejected children of the department of pediatrics, haunted her.

Maybe this was the best that could happen to the baby. At the pediatrics building, truly "an asylum filled with the deformed, handicapped, and the sick where only miracles will save them", resident physicians perform prowess (exceptional ability or skill) in spite of their meager means. "This baby will survive thanks to the generosity of various people," sighs one person used to attending the largest hospital of the country, located just a stone's throw from the national Palace.

In an adjacent room there, another category of children is abandoned -- this time, kids branded by genetics. These are children heavily handicapped and whom no one wants. And will not probably ever want. Twenty-three of these children are penned in a 300 square foot room.

Some are autistic, epileptic, or paralytic. Three suffer from hydrocephalus, an excess of spinal/cerebral fluid in the brain.

Nailed to a bed, one of them stares at the ceiling with glazed eyes. He has a belly that sticks out and scrawny legs, yet strangely; there is a certain happiness that emanates from his entire being.

In the hallway, an assistant feeds little Jude, a three-year-old rascal, born blind. Between the cries of Rachelle, an autistic child of about 8 years, incapable of being quiet for 5 minutes, the "nanny", affectionately,



Abandoned babies at the facility of Mercy and Sharing.

(Photo: François Louis)



A little one in good health at the l'HUEH hospital.

(Photo: François Louis)



Children who are taken care of financially by Mercy and Sharing.

(Photo: François Louis)

directs a teaspoon of corn and pureed peas toward her face, glassy-eyed with a wide-open mouth.

In spite of everything - heavy physical, mental and sensory handicaps – these children are “privileged.” They have the chance to live with certain dignity. A chance that few handicapped children have in Haiti. Because at least they eat their fill and receive medical care.

All this, at the expense of the generous benefactor who runs the “Mercy and Sharing Foundation”, a philanthropic American who until now allows, Jude, Steeve, Rachelle and lots of other handicapped children, to live with some dignity. They are still breathing. “We cannot for all that throw them away,” explains a homemaker who works for the foundation.

In the city, at least half a dozen infants are abandoned each week in hospitals, public places or simply thrown in garbage bins.

They come from single-parent families whose income is under the threshold of poverty, from rapes or out-of-wedlock relations. The most fortunate are abandoned in public hospitals which do not have the means to care for them yet are able to guide them correctly.

Nevertheless, the probability of their survival is definitely higher than that of the children abandoned in the urban jungle.

For years, there have been many conferences about the fate of these children. Nothing has come of it. No one has really been interested in how to take responsibility for these children.

A responsibility, which first and foremost belongs to the Department of Public Health, to the people of Haiti and to planning. Because it is urgent.

Our country had 8,373,750 habitants in 2003. According to all projections, the population could simply double between now and 2020. Let's not forget that 55.8% of our population is 18 years old or older. That is old enough to procreate.

At the general hospital where Martine abandoned her baby like so many others before her, there are 23 little lonely buoys that are sending SOS signals.

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