



NEWS RELEASE

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Thousands of Children Orphaned or Separated from Their Families in Haiti Earthquake Aftermath

Women's Refugee Commission Urges Children Be Provided Protection in Haiti while Reunification Efforts Are Made

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Washington, D.C., January 22—The chaotic and devastating aftermath of Haiti's earthquake has left thousands of children separated from their families. United Nations and relief agencies on the ground are partnering to establish registration and reunification processes for separated and unaccompanied children. As these efforts are underway, it is crucial that a full assessment of children's situation and needs be done before making any placement decisions.

"It's tempting to want to airlift children out of Haiti, getting them out of harm's way immediately," says Michelle Brané, director of the detention and asylum program at the Women's Refugee Commission. "But it's important to remember that in the current chaos, thousands of people, including parents and children, are still searching for their families. Removing children from countries too quickly after an emergency has been shown to jeopardize family reunification efforts, create additional instability for children and increase the risk that children will fall into the hands of traffickers and other ill-intentioned individuals who have been known to exploit these situations."

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has issued guidelines for humanitarian parole for orphans who have been screened, identified for adoption eligibility and were matched with American families before the earthquake. That means that children who had American families waiting for them before the earthquake will be able to join their new families as soon as possible.

The Women's Refugee Commission supports DHS's prompt response and efforts to protect children but is concerned about the numerous accounts of children being removed from Haiti who do not have pre-earthquake adoptions in place and who may have families in Haiti looking for them.

As previous crises have demonstrated, many children who are separated from their families during an emergency are not, in fact, orphans. Even before the earthquake, there were many

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children in orphanages who were not actually orphans and who maintained close contact with their families. It is not uncommon for parents or caregivers in Haiti to send their children to orphanages for better care and security.

The Women's Refugee Commission recommends that the U.S. government consider the following measures to protect Haitian children:

- **Immediate family reunification services:** Priority must be given to child registration, family tracing and family reunification services to reunite children with their parents or customary caregivers.
- **Protection In-Country:** Foreign governments, nongovernmental organizations and concerned individuals must support the efforts of the United Nations and international organizations to meet the protection needs of children in-country.
- **Temporary Evacuation as a Last Resort:** If children must be evacuated out of Haiti because their protection needs cannot be met in-country, the evacuation must be carefully documented, the children must be registered with the proper authorities and all efforts must be made to reunify them with family before any adoption proceedings are considered.
- **Children with urgent medical needs:** Children with needs that cannot be addressed by the emergency medical care delivery efforts in Haiti should be transported to the U.S. or wherever they are able to access appropriate medical care. Available family members should be allowed to travel with them.
- **Children in mixed family status:** There are mixed status families in Haiti in which one or more members have authorization to legally enter the United States but others do not. These families are being forced to choose between leaving their children behind because they lack the proper authorization, or remaining in Haiti. The U.S. must allow mixed status families to enter the United States together.
- **Expedite I-730s for Haitian refugees and asylees:** Refugees and asylees in the U.S. have the right to bring a spouse or unmarried children under the age of 21 into the U.S. under the I-730 Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition. This process should be expedited for all Haitian refugees and asylees in the U.S. so that their children and spouses can reach the safety of the U.S. more quickly.
- All children **interdicted at sea** should be properly screened, in compliance with international law, to ensure their lives are not in danger if they are returned.

For more information, go to womensrefugeecommission.org.

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