

## *Nou:* Peace Corps Involvement in Disaster Response

“Individually, we are one drop. Together we are an ocean.” -- Ryunosuke Satoro

The second week of January 2010 was a restless time for the Peace Corps Dominican Republic Volunteer community. Each day, more news coverage revealed the devastating realities left in the wake of the 7.1 earthquake that hit Haiti just outside of Port au Prince on January 12.

Many of the PCDR Volunteers felt the aftershocks (both physical and emotional) in their communities. Hispaniola, the Caribbean island shared by Dominican Republic and Haiti, is divided down the middle by distinct cultures, different languages, an inequality of wealth, but a very porous border. Almost every community in the Dominican Republic has a Haitian population represented.

I was in the capital of Santo Domingo on the night of January 12<sup>th</sup> and saw the initial coverage of the earthquake unfold on CNN. It was hard to imagine the destruction and suffering only 150 miles away. Along with many other Volunteers, I felt the need to help out in any way that I could.

We were soon notified that PCDR staff was working with the US Embassy, Peace Corps Washington, and international aid organizations to see how PCDR could best fit into the relief efforts.

There was a wringing of hands and a feeling of helplessness over the next few days waiting for decisions to be made. Weighed in balance were the benefits of skill sets that we could offer against straining the already over-stressed resources in the affected areas, and the inherent dangers of placing Peace Corps volunteers in a disaster zone.

On January 20, I received the call that a small group of volunteers with appropriate skills (language and medical) would be sent to the border town of Jimani to assess needs and work with the public and international hospitals receiving earthquake patients. Upon arrival, eight days after earthquake, there were more than 500 patients split between the public hospital and the private Good Samaritan hospital. Buses, trucks, and ambulances pulled up to the doors of the emergency entrance at the public hospital in regular intervals to unload patients with spinal injuries, amputations, and infected wounds-- all in need of immediate medical care. There were rows and rows of patients lined up on the ground and in the hallways waiting for surgery or sutures. The needs still greatly outweighed the resources.

With other medically trained volunteers, I worked at the public hospital and at the private Good Samaritan in emergency intake and intensive care. Other volunteers, recently trained in Haitian Creole, organized translators and helped develop a functioning staff structure for the hospital.

Over the next month, more Peace Corps Volunteers joined the international teams working at the Good Samaritan hospital. PCDR Volunteers were sent in for one and two week shifts working in food preparation, organizing transport, administration, information technology, medical care, and supervising translators. Peace Corps volunteers worked as patient and family advocates-- helping with non-medical needs when the medical staff was preoccupied. Volunteers worked in other areas of the country as well, organizing supplies and conducting surveys for USAID.

Peace Corps Volunteers are a valuable resource in times of disaster response. They have a short response time— familiar with local transportation and not needing international flights. They are resourceful, low-maintenance, and informed on local safety issues and political situations. They are sensitive to cultural and linguistic nuances. In addition, they have a compassionate view of an individual's unique situation, which they have learned by living as part of a community.

In the Haitian Creole language, the subject *nou* means both “we” and “you” (plural). When a speaker uses *nou*, the distinction of the “us” and the “you all” is deconstructed. In essence, you cannot be separated from the community you are addressing.

The Peace Corps Volunteers that I worked with during this tragedy acted with keen cultural insight and humanity in the face of the chaos. By lending their hands to the pool of international workers, they acted as *nou* and broke-down the us/you distinction of Haitians/Dominicans/Americans during a time when it was overwhelming apparent that we were all of one human race.

I want to thank Peace Corps for allowing us to take part in the post-earthquake relief efforts, and urge them to continue to support volunteers working in disaster response.

**Amy Martin** is a RPCV Dominican Republic 2008-2010. She has returned home to Arizona where she works as an emergency medical technician at Grand Canyon National Park.