

A REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK SCENES OF DESTRUCTION AND GRIEF FROM POST REPORTER JOHN LANTIGUA'S COVERAGE OF THE HAITIAN EARTHQUAKE.PALM BEACH POSTCONTINUING COVERAGEA REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK SCENES OF DESTRUCTION AND GRIEF FROM POST REPORTER JOHN LANTIGUA'S COVERAGE OF THE HAITIAN EARTHQUAKE.

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FULL TEXT

PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI – About a week after the 7.0 earthquake decimated this region, actor John Travolta, one of the world's most famous followers of Scientology, piloted a 7,000-pound planeload of supplies into Haiti.

He created headlines. But he was not the only member of his sect to bring relief to Haiti. At the University of Miami's Project Medishare tent hospital near the main airport, other followers were at work.

Wearing orange-juice-colored T-shirts announcing that each was a Scientology "volunteer minister," they were much in evidence. According to the organization, other volunteers also worked at the Toussaint L'Ouverture International Airport, helping to organize medical personnel arriving and giving spiritual counseling to persons evacuating the country.

Scientology volunteers also participated in disaster relief after 9/11, the 2004 tsunami and Hurricane Katrina.

Critics have accused Scientologists of taking advantage of disasters as an opportunity to proselytize. Scientology recruiting questionnaires are known to seek out people's insecurities and vulnerabilities and disaster victims are at least temporarily full of those, critics say.

But Michael Kelley, an official at the University of Miami Medical School campus in Boca Raton, apparently saw none of that at the tent hospital.

"They are running the big supply tent here, which is a tough, thankless job," Kelley said. "You can think what you want about their beliefs, but they work their tails off in these situations."

FEARING A BROKEN HIP

Houda Hade, 58, whose family owns a large supermarket chain in Haiti called Delimart, was injured when her second-floor office caved in. She was rescued and for days lay at her home in Petionville wondering whether she had a broken hip.

Hade, of Lebanese descent, was eventually driven to the rare facility that had an operating X-ray machine: the Israeli military emergency surgical unit. Whatever the friction between Israel and Lebanon thousands of miles away, there was none between medical professionals here and a patient in need.

The X-ray showed her hip was broken.

"They confirmed she needed an operation," her brother-in-law, Lionel Gousse, wrote to a reporter in an e-mail." The Israelis gave a warm reception to her and they were very professional and polite."

Hade eventually was flown to Florida where she was operated on. She is recuperating.
TAKING ADVANTAGE OF TRAGEDY

Overheard in the back of a pickup truck transporting American doctors working at tent hospitals in Port-au-Prince:

"I had a couple come in who said their son had been injured in the earthquake and had lost his sight," said a California ophthalmologist. "I examined him and it was clear right away that his condition was congenital and that he had been blind long before the earthquake."

The doctor shrugged. "Those people probably figured that this was their one chance to have an American doctor examine their kid and maybe do something for him," he said. "I can't blame them. I'd do the same thing myself."

PROTECTING THE CHILDREN

Overheard on a bus transporting medical personnel and other evacuees:

A Seattle doctor spoke of finding a girl, 14, on the side of a road, taking care of five younger children, possibly orphans. While he spoke with her, a woman arrived who insisted she ran an orphanage and would take the children.

Some institutions that call themselves orphanages in Haiti sell poor children into slave-like conditions, to work for well-to-do families in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and sometimes the United States. The Haitians have a word for those indentured servants: restaveks.

The doctor became suspicious, told the woman the children needed medical attention and he was taking them. The woman became belligerent.

"But when I identified myself as an American physician and told her I was taking charge, she backed down," he said. "God only knows what she was up to."

MORGUE DIRECTOR WITH NO CHOICE

One of the few decorations in the dank office of Port-au-Prince morgue director Yves Jovin is a pristine poster

embossed with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

Unfortunately there is no provision in the declaration assuring human beings of decent burial. In order to prevent the spread of disease, Jovin was forced to organize the interment of tens of thousands of Haitians in mass graves.

ARTISTS RETURN TO THE STREETS

About a week after the quake, artists returned to the streets of Petionville, where they display their art on the side of the road. One of the more popular images over the past two years has been portraiture of American president Barack Obama.

But about 10 days after the quake, one such businessman was featuring a freshly painted version of the Haitian presidential palace, the country's best-known building.

The palace collapsed in the earthquake, but in this version it existed in all its original splendor, pure white, and seeming to float off the ground.

"It is floating the way a memory floats," he said. "This is the way for people to remember it."LOCALS DO THEIR PART

A medical team organized by Palm Beach Gardens Medical Center nurse Michele Sidney and Miami's Dr. Saidel Laine arrived at the Eleazar Germain Hospital in Petionville Jan. 22. Before they arrived, the small hospital was disorganized. Soon after the quake, cadavers filled a first-floor office. In another office, a corpse lay bundled on a gray metal desk, as if the person who had worked at that desk had died. That wasn't the case.

The group organized the facility and performed various operations that first day. But once the cutting was over, it was clear that there were too few nurses to care for those patients and others.

"I'm told that 62 nurses died in one hospital that collapsed here," said a New Jersey doctor. "Do you realize that one surgeon saving lives can create work for eight nurses? I think the biggest crisis down the line will be a shortage of nurses in Haiti."Editor's note:

Staff writer John Lantigua returned from Haiti recently after reporting for 13 days from its earthquake-ravaged capital city.

Credit: JOHN LANTIGUA Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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