

January 12, 2012 – Salesian GHQ - Haiti: two years later



(ANS – Rome) – On January 12, 2010, an earthquake of 7.0 with its epicenter about 16 miles from Port-au-Prince struck Haiti severely. The extent of the damage was enormous; according to the International Red Cross and the UN, over three million people were caught up in the earthquake. Two years later, the work of reconstruction continues, and for the Salesians, who this year will celebrate 75 years of presence in Haiti, the task of educating and training the young.

The Salesians and their work were seriously affected. In various places buildings were damaged and collapsed, but more tragic was the loss of human life. Bro. Hubert Sanon, two young Salesians in formation, Bros. Atsime Wilfrid and Vibrun Valsaint, and about 250 youngsters in the ENAM center were buried under the rubble. Other pupils from Salesian schools and members of the Salesian Family lost their lives when their homes, churches, or workplaces collapsed.

The Madrid Mission Office has issued a press release with some information about the work of the Salesians in Haiti, concerned in the first place to educate and train the next generation of Haitians.

There are over 23,000 children and teens and more than 1,200 teachers at present in the Salesian schools and vocational training centers. After two years of intense work and great efforts, many youngsters once again have the opportunity to be educated and to take the lead in the rebirth of their country.

For example, at Cap Haitien over 850 youngsters attend ordinary school, and there are 145 in the agricultural school; in Don Bosco Polytechnical Center at Fort Liberté 120 students are taking courses in building and carpentry and in the School of Nursing. At Timtake there are over 600 pupils, and soon there will be places for over 1,000 youngsters in the center at Gressier, which in October received a visit from Queen Sophia of Spain.

Port-au-Prince was the area most affected by the earthquake. Hundreds of thousands of people in the capital were looking for help and the means of survival. Two years later, great progress has been made but much still needs to be done in one of the poorest countries in the world. According to the United Nations Development Program, there are still today about 600,000 people in refugee camps without a home to go to; only 25% of the rubble has been removed. Cholera killed over 7,000 people in 2011.

In Haiti over 80% of the population was living in poverty before the earthquake, and half the population could not read or write. "Haiti is not a country afflicted by the earthquake of January 2010; it is a country that has been despoiled many times before that," Haitian economist Camille Chalmers has said. Certainly, "Haiti is a strong country, and the earthquake has given us the possibility of making it a better country," say the Salesians who have been working there for 75 years.