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Earthquake Day in Port au Prince ~ Chris Rollings

The following is a blog entry from Chris Rollings, director of Clean Water for Haiti (www.rollingsinhaiti.wordpress.com). It was posted Wednesday, January 13. Permission was granted to publish it in Island Tides as a first hand account. Please be advised that the description of the devastation is disturbing.

Yesterday was absolutely terrible. I'm going to share my whole experience because I'm hoping it will be therapeutic. In any case I think I'm going to have nightmares for a long time.

I spent the day in Port au Prince getting a loaner vehicle from the Toyota dealer and then taking care of some mission business. On my way out of town in the afternoon, I was on Delmas 9 (I think) and the loaner vehicle I had just picked up broke down. I called the dealer to come get it. Shortly after they arrived, the earthquake hit.

I'm ashamed of the first thought that went through my mind, which was 'Cool, I've never been in a big earthquake before!' As the quake rolled on, though, I remembered the conversations I've had with the other missionaries about what an earthquake would mean for Haiti. Of course, it would be devastating. Construction materials and methods aren't just shoddy, they're suicidal, but now isn't the time to rampage, just to tell you about my experiences.

I didn't actually fall on the ground, but I stumbled around quite a bit. When the tremors ceased, a large dust cloud was rising from the building a few doors down. A 3 story school full of teenage girls had collapsed. I stood around looking stupid for longer than I'd like to admit. I looked at the truck from Toyota, tried to call my wife (the service was out) and looked around me at people's reactions. Virtually everyone reacted in strange ways. Eventually, I went to the school and started working to pull trapped students from the wreckage.

The work was very hard because I was working by myself. People would come up and shout into the wreckage, 'Is so-and-so inside?' at the top of their lungs repeatedly. I would ask for help in moving rubble and they would say they have to find their own people. One guy stayed and helped, on and off. I got one girl out, who was very frantic. I told her to stop shouting and pray for help. She was about 10 feet deep under the collapsed cement roof of the building. At one point I went and borrowed a hammer from someone to break up the large piece

of cement that she was trapped behind. The aftershocks scared the crap out of me, and I really didn't like being under that cement slab. There was an obviously dead woman under the slab with us.

When the girl was out, I took my hammer and moved over to find the next trapped girl. All I could see was her face and left arm, and she frantically called out to me. I asked her to calm down because it would help me to work and asked her to pray for both of us. She calmed down and became very brave. I was having trouble seeing her where she was jammed under the slab. I pulled out a very large piece of rubble that didn't really help Jacqueline at all (her name was Jacqueline). There was some sort of object behind that rubble and when I went to move it it turned out to be another girl's bottom. The girl cried out but I could barely hear her—her whole head was underneath rubble.

At this point I began to realize that I was in over my head. All I had was a hammer, and it was quickly becoming pitch dark with twilight fading and no electricity anywhere. I tried to borrow a flashlight, but it was impossible. I had a moment of feeling intense helplessness. After thinking and praying for a minute, I told Jacqueline that I had to leave her and find more help. I couldn't do anything without a flashlight, and she needed to keep praying and remember that her parents were coming to look for her.

I walked 4 or 5 miles to a place where I could get a bus, then got on one eventually made it home just after 9pm. On my way home, I resolved to return to Port au Prince the next day with 2 trucks full of tools and workers to do whatever we could. I met a guy on the bus who was holding a sandwich. He had left his house to go buy a sandwich when the earthquake hit. He returned to his home to find it flattened, then went to the school that he teaches at to find it flattened. With nothing left but a sandwich in his hand, and \$7 in his sock, he set out for Cap Haitien to be with the rest of his family.

I slept a little bit last night even though I kept thinking of Jacqueline and her classmate stuck in the rubble, in the dark. This morning all of the workers enthusiastically loaded all the tools we could use into the trucks along with food and water and set off for Port au Prince. I took them to the school and quickly made my way to the place Jacqueline and the other student were but both of them were dead.

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Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada.
Email: islandtides@islandtides.com.

Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

Some of the local people had been working through the night to rescue their loved ones. They had found lighting and hack saws and had already pulled some people out, including a lot of bodies. We joined their efforts with our power tools. Quickly, we pulled out two more living girls and then a third. The fourth and fifth were a lot more work and each had a severely crushed foot. After that, there were no more cries for help, even when everybody went quiet in order to listen. Lots of dead bodies were still stuck, but getting at them would require large machines.

At that point, I decided to tackle the problem of the growing pile of bodies, which were starting to smell. A volunteer from the community collected all the identifying information he could, and the various family members all signed off. It turned out to be a mistake. The General Hospital, which houses Port au Prince's only government run morgue, has been destroyed. After we had already loaded the bodies (10 or so) the problem was explained to me. I saw some nuns driving by and asked them where I could find a morgue and they told me that they buried their dead directly, and they heard talk of a big hole being dug out by Ti Tanyen for the others. So we unloaded the bodies back into the lane, where I'm sure they still remain.

We spent an hour boring a hole through a floor into a collapsed chamber to try to rescue a 2 year old child but the cries had stopped before we even began.

We're not going to go back tomorrow because I strongly suspect that most people that can be rescued have already been rescued, and buildings that still have survivors will have plenty of volunteers from now on. Today was by far the most important day for rescues.

This has been a very emotional experience for me. The bodies stopped bothering me after a while, but I think what I will always carry with me is the conversation I had with Jacqueline before I left her. How could I leave someone who was dying, trapped in a building! That's so wrong! At the very least, she needed someone to sit and comfort her in her last hours. But if I hadn't found my way home last night, then today I wouldn't have been able to bring the CWH crew in. Still, leaving her was one of the hardest things I've ever done. She seemed so brave when I left! I told her I was going to get help, but I didn't tell her I would be gone until morning. I think this is going to trouble me for a long time. ☹

Clean Water for Haiti (CWH) was established in 2001 by a Canadian couple and is a volunteer run, faith based missions and humanitarian aid organization. As a registered non-profit organization in Canada and the US, CWH works to provide sustainable solutions to the water crisis in Haiti. Although filters for clean water are not essential for immediate relief, the entire country is in need of clean water and donations will aid with the rebuilding of Haiti. Visit their website www.cleanwaterforhaiti.org for more information or to make a donation.