

Jewish community responds to crisis in Haiti

By FRANCES KRAFT, Staff Reporter

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Jewish federations and other Jewish organizations are mobilizing to help Haitians suffering the devastating effects of last week's 7.0 magnitude earthquake, the strongest one in Haiti in 200 years.

An Israeli search-and-rescue team finds a man trapped in the rubble of a building in Port-au-Prince. They pulled him out and saved his life. [Israel Sun photo]

But amid the news of staggering amounts of death, injury and property damage, including damage to both the National Palace and United Nations peacekeeping mission's headquarters, there was unexpected good news at the Toronto offices of Ve'ahavta – the Canadian Jewish Humanitarian and Relief Committee, which recently became involved with a Haitian orphanage – the aptly named House of Hope, in Port-au-Prince, 12 kilometres from the epicentre of the earthquake.

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“We just got word late this morning that, miraculously, the orphanage is still standing and all the kids are still alive, while villagers have died and are coming to the orphanage for respite,” Avrum Rosensweig, Ve'ahavta's president and founder, told The CJN last Thursday.

A Ve'ahavta board member had sent the orphanage a satellite phone with a visiting medical group, Rosensweig said.

“We were all braced to get the worst news, that these 200 children had perished,” Rosensweig said. Sadly, he added that the number of orphans needing services in Haiti will increase dramatically. “This tears at all our heartstrings. The Jewish People is very familiar with tragedy.”

Ironically, a small group of Ve'ahavta staff members would have arrived in Haiti on the day of the earthquake.

With a per capita income of \$3.60 per day, Haiti is the most impoverished country in the Western Hemisphere and thus especially vulnerable to natural disasters, a Ve'ahavta news release stated last week.

As of Monday morning, six days after the Jan. 12 disaster, Ve'ahavta had collected

\$152,000 for its Haiti Earthquake Relief Fund.

The organization is working on sending “basic supplies like water, diapers, baby bottles and pharmaceuticals” to the orphanage, which Rosensweig said is being used as a respite centre. As well, the organization plans to help to repair whatever damage the building has suffered.

As of Tuesday, UJA Federation of Greater Toronto had raised \$386,000 from more than 1,600 donors, while in western Canada, the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg’s Haiti Earthquake Relief Fund had raised more than \$17,000 as of last Friday, and the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver raised more than \$16,000 in the first 24 hours of launching its Haiti Earthquake Relief Fund.

“The Jewish community is deeply saddened and concerned about the tragedy in Haiti, and we are committed to continuing the long tradition of Jewish humanitarianism during times of crisis,” said Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver board chair, Michael Fugman, in a news release.

Over and above the amount in UJA Federation’s fund in Toronto, four other federations have directed a total of \$40,000 to Toronto’s federation to help the Israel Forum for International Humanitarian Aid (IsrAID), which has sent a 15-person search and rescue team from Israel to Haiti. The team is working at the site of the collapsed central hospital in Port-au-Prince, where thousands of wounded have gathered, according to a federation news release dated Sunday.

UJA Federation is sending 100 per cent of the funds it raises to IsrAID, the release stated.

The federation is IsrAID’s largest organizational supporter, said federation spokesperson Howard English.

“The scope of this disaster is really beyond description,” he added. “The Jewish community recognizes what a calamity this is.”

In Montreal, Federation CJA has been asking members of the Jewish community to join the global effort to assist the Haitian people.

The organization expected donations to top \$80,000 by the end of last Friday, and money was still coming in. “We are extremely moved by the response from the Jewish community. It’s just outstanding,” said Federation CJA communications director Howard Krosnick.

He also noted that employees of the shoe retailer, Aldo Group, are designating the money raised by their internal campaign to the CJA relief fund, and the corporation has promised to match dollar-for-dollar their contributions.

“There is a deep historical connection between Haitians and Jews, which includes Haiti having rendered assistance to the Jewish People during the Holocaust, and Haiti has been a long-standing friend of Israel,” the federation said in an e-mailed message.

“This desperately poor country – the poorest in the western hemisphere – cries out for help at this critical time. We cannot but feel deep compassion for their plight, and we would be failing in our duty to come to the assistance of the vulnerable if we do not stand in solidarity with Haiti today.”

The federation is working with local and international partners, including the Montreal Haitian community, to funnel help in the most effective way.

As well, a jam session was held at Montreal’s student-run Ghetto Shul on Saturday night to raise funds for Haiti.

The Jewish General Hospital (JGH) in Montreal is also assisting in Haiti relief. Its foundation collected several hundred boxes of medical supplies, including medications, that were shipped on Saturday. The foundation is also raising funds among staff, volunteers and lay leaders at the hospital. External donors are being sought to match these contributions.

The hospital said it is also prepared to send interested doctors and nurses to Haiti, if the Canadian and Quebec aid agencies request this type of support.

“This tragedy has hit us close to home,” said JGH executive director Dr. Hartley Stern. “Many of our staff and patients are from Haiti and have family and friends who are living there now. We are grieving with them and will show our support in any way we can.”

A news release from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office, dated last Thursday, said that Netanyahu had ordered Israel’s defence ministry, foreign ministry and public security minister officials to quickly consider how to render humanitarian assistance to Haiti following the earthquake, and that an advance IDF Home Front Command, IDF Medical Corps and Foreign Ministry delegation had left for the island.

The group included engineering, medical, logistics and rescue experts.

As well, Israeli ambassador to the Dominican Republic, Amos Radian, had been instructed to proceed to Haiti to report on the situation there.

Relatives of Sharona Elsaieh, daughter of the late peace activist Abie Nathan, said last week that she was missing. They heard from her last Friday, alive and in good condition, according to a JTA report. She had been living in Jamaica for several years.

Two other Israelis, a woman and her nine-year-old son, were also reported missing. Several other Israelis also live in Haiti.

Rabbi Shimon Pelman – a Chabad rabbi based in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic – was on his way to Haiti last Thursday, two days after the quake, when reached on his cellphone by The CJN. He also serves the tiny Jewish community of Haiti, which numbers perhaps eight families in Port-au-Prince, the capital, about 16 kilometres from the earthquake’s epicentre. He said he had not heard of any Canadian Jews being in Haiti at the time of the earthquake.

The rabbi had not been able to contact anyone in Haiti, he said. “There’s no communication. Nothing works.”

Haiti and the Dominican Republic each occupy part of the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean. Normally, it is about a three-hour drive from Santo Domingo to Port-au-Prince, the rabbi said.

Travelling with two Dominican diplomats, and taking kosher food for Israeli relief personnel in Haiti to have for Shabbat, the rabbi was expecting members of the Dominican Jewish community to follow with more supplies. The Dominican has a Jewish population of about 350.

On an individual basis, Julian Brass, a 26-year-old Toronto-based entrepreneur, is organizing a fundraiser to help Haiti relief efforts.

The founder of NotableTV.com, a new-media company launched last March, Brass decided last week, when he saw the scope of the earthquake’s destruction on television news, to “shut down normal operations” at his company for three to four days to create a “massive” fundraiser that would galvanize young professionals, as well as raise money and collect goods to send to Haiti. Details were not yet finalized when The CJN went to press Monday.

As well, NotableTV has started a Facebook group, which now has 10,000 members, and is donating \$1 for every two people to join its Haiti initiative.

Brass – who hosted a JUMP (Jewish Urban Meeting Place) event featuring popular Israel musician Idan Raichel in November – has a personal motivation for helping Haiti. Last year he learned about the country from interviewing Haitian-American rapper Wyclef Jean.

To help Haiti, NotableTV has partnered with ONEXONE, the international charity founded by Joelle (Joey) Adler, president of Diesel Canada.

Following the earthquake, Canadian Jewish Congress’ national president Mark Freiman and CEO Bernie Farber wrote to the Haitian chargé d’affaires in Ottawa to express deep sorrow and extend condolences on the extent of damage and loss of life.

The funds established by Jewish federations are “in keeping with the traditional Jewish concept of ‘tikkun olam,’ ” Freiman and Farber wrote.

Other Jewish organizations, including B'nai Brith Canada and Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center, expressed their sympathy and support to the Haitian community.

As of Tuesday morning, Jan. 19, The Jewish Federations of North America, collectively among the top 10 charities on the continent, and Jewish Federation movement have raised more than \$2 million for emergency aid to victims of the devastating earthquake in Haiti, with funds still arriving.