

## Haitian's in Ouanaminthe Area Locked Out of Neighboring D.R. Due to Cholera Scare

(Ouanaminthe is in the northeast corner of Haiti, right across the border with Dajabon, Dominican Republic)

**Sunday, November 14, 2010 ( by Pam Mann)**

The 12-member mission team seemed to have had a good week in Ouanaminthe: ten people worked surgery on the third floor of Univers Medical Centre and two Columbus police officers trained our security guards at UMC and IU. This morning began with a trek through the market, especially for the first-timers who were more than half the team. Meanwhile, the veterans packed bags onto Bus 101 and perused the artifacts displayed below the mango trees near the guest house. It was such a calm beginning to the day.

I even had time to sit and wait for the market goers to return. My thoughts turned to English current events paragraphs which my 11<sup>th</sup> graders had written this past week. One girl wrote: "There will be elections in Haiti on Sunday, November 28<sup>th</sup> for President, senators and representatives. The candidates campaign. Campaigning is traveling around the country, giving food or money to people so they will vote for you." A boy wrote: "I am eighteen so I can vote for the first time. I am a little afraid. Sometimes people do bad things if you do not vote for the candidate they want." I assumed there was a secret ballot so I'm unsure how that sort of intimidation is played out. The current democratic process appears to the youth, at least, to need an overhaul.

With Samson at the wheel, we piled into Bus 101. Dave needed to exchange money in Dajabón so he came too. I could have exchanged it for him but, when I admitted that I was anxious about how the crossing would go with so much tension at the border since the cholera outbreak in the Artibonite region (75 miles southwest of Ouanaminthe), he agreed to come along. Boy, was I glad that he did.

Between the city of Ouanaminthe and the Massacre River (which is the international border), there is a low-lying plain. Last Sunday morning this plain was underwater, flooded by Hurricane Thomas rainfall. Life-long residents in their 50s had never seen so much flooding. Claudette, who lives in sight of the school roof said, "We can just thank God that, by His grace, He held back the waters as He did and no lives were lost." Since that flooding, with continued lighter rains all week, the ground remains soft mud, pocked with puddles.

As the bus drove down into the muddy plain, we saw the winding road to the bridge now flooded with idling vehicles, driver's doors swung wide, obviously long detained. "We'll go see what the problem is," Dave announced to the group. I followed him with team passports and border fees in hand. The day before, a Friday, was to have been the first Dajabón open market day in three weeks. But it never happened. Instead, at the massive pavilion constructed near the new European-Union-built bridge, Dominicans brought truckloads of goods to sell. No Haitians were permitted to enter Dajabón as had been the custom every Monday and Friday prior to cholera scare. Evidently there was some unrest yesterday among the frustrated Haitian retailers who wanted to be able to buy wholesale in Dajabón. What happened exactly we do not know.

Today no vehicles from Haiti would be allowed to enter the DR. Our bus would not be able to proceed any further. I got the passports stamped at the Haitian immigration office and then returned to the group. In the meantime, Dave had hired a large two-wheel cart and two men to push it. The team's luggage was roped into the cart and Samson returned to IU with the bus. Our entourage proceeded on foot behind the cart, swinging wide of the vehicle-clogged road across the firmer spots in the muddy plain. People like adventure on a mission trip, right? The sun had finally come out so we were getting a healthy dose of vitamin D besides.....an all-inclusive resort package! :-)

Where the moneychangers regularly sit by the incline to the bridge, our cart pushers led us back onto the road. I noticed one of the two pushers was barefoot. Their sinewy muscles strained with the ascent. Suddenly a noisy commotion from the crowd at the gate made me look up ahead. The cart halted. Before us, a mob of angry faces began berating us for what? Invading their space maybe. Oh, dear, I thought, these surly expressions were going to be the last memories of Haiti for this team. The cart pushers and several other taller men spoke in our defense, explaining that we too only wanted to cross the bridge. Then word was shouted from the closed bridge gate that the cart would not be allowed entry. So, with the cart in the midst of the sea of bodies, the ropes were untied. One of the taller men offered that several men could carry suitcases for us. I declined explaining that if we did not take our bags ourselves, there would be no assurance that a bag was not being stolen. I apologized respectfully and sensed that no offense was taken. So some small women ended up with some very heavy bags but we managed to wiggle through the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd. Once through the Haiti gate, we only had about fifteen feet to cross to get to the next gate, which was Dominican controlled and located midway on the bridge. This stretch of the bridge was relatively open, only a half dozen UN soldiers and a miscellaneous few civilians strolling about. At the DR gate, a squat agitated Dominican met us. I don't recall him wearing military grab though several men around him did. He barked something gruff at me when I

presented the team's passports. "These people are traveling to Puerto Plata," I explained. His second round of barking I understood. Several Haitian men had latched onto team suitcases to earn a little money as porters. These individuals, the gate guard insisted, would not be allowed to pass. Dave took care of tipping the five-second porters and paying the cart guys. Then the team with their Haitian-free bags received admittance to the *Republica Dominicana*. Not so fast! "Go get your hands washed!" we were told. It was not a great day for Caribbean tourism hospitality but we dutifully did the hand-washing ritual. I went first so I could get over to the immigration office with all the passports. The team assured Dave that all their bags had survived the crossing and no one seemed to have been pick-pocketed.

Stamped passports in my bag, I stared through Dajabón's landmark arch for the taxi van. I saw lots of DR border control troops in desert camouflage but no waiting taxi. Dave's DR cell was on the fritz so we couldn't call Juan, our contact. Well, he's probably close by, I thought. I trekked down the road to do recon while Dave mustered the group. Sure enough, an *Espreso Liñero* bus was parked in front of the Dajabón hospital with a stout driver who seemed pleased to see a white woman in mid-search. The team was passing under the arch when Dave got caught up in conversation with an American woman who was hoping to cross into Haiti to deliver a truck-load of medical supplies to Limbe. She told Dave that the word was Haitians would burn any vehicle crossing the bridge. Dave laughed. She obviously hadn't heard that from a Haitian. I waved the team on so they could get on their way. They might get some relaxing sunshine on the beach yet.

After hugs good-bye and a "*Vaya con Dios*" to the driver, we exchanged some IU dollars into pesos, and then headed to a cell phone store off *Calle Ancha* where in 30 seconds the guy got Dave's cell phone to work again. When you know how, it's easy. No charge. Then we stopped at Karla Mini-Mart for groceries for Michele and ourselves. Then it hit me. We had just purchased groceries – the exact goal of all the frustrated people now pressing against the bridge gate. How were we going to walk through that crowd with a bulging bag of goods at our sides? Why should we be permitted access when our neighbors weren't? Because we were foreigners? Because we were white? As we approached the arch, I expressed my concerns to Dave. We decided we would give up our groceries without resistance if people got hot with us. That decision was calming. Having a plan in the face of chaos is itself a comfort. Walking ahead of us were three young men, each with a large bundle on his head. When we arrived at the Haiti gate, they tried to push into the crowd but no one was giving them room. One guy even hurled his bundle on top of the crowd and they hurled it back at him.

"Well," I said to Dave. "Maybe we spend the night."

Dave nodded. "Tomorrow will likely be calmer." We stood there, pondering our options. From the bridge, we could see the river bank below, flanked by UN troops, a soldier in riot gear every four feet. "All this security when these people just want to feed their families. What's wrong with this picture?"

Suddenly, a small man with a motorcycle key in hand appeared before us. Regularly on the bridge, the more enterprising moto taxi drivers signal you with a moto key to indicate that they will give you a lift. "Come this way," he said. He directed us to one side of the gate, insisting that if we just clambered over the bridge railing onto the rim of the bridge, we'd be outside the gate and could then slip around the feverish center of the crowd. I peered over the side of the bridge at the steep gravelly descent into the river. Dave muttered a comforting comment to me, "If we slip, we'll get pretty scraped up, but probably won't break anything."

"Well, in that case, let's give it a try." The man knows how to show a girl a good time, doesn't he? The taxi driver led the way, followed by Dave and then me. Thankfully, I wore a flared skirt which allowed me to straddle the four foot concrete bridge railing without baring too much white thigh. I felt the cement scrape at my inner thigh but, at least, none of us tumbled down the river bank. Amazingly, the peripheral crowd parted for us to pass, giving us little notice. Dave looked back at me with raised eyebrows that said, "That was too easy." We hopped on the back of our guide's motorcycle, me first side-saddle behind the driver, and then Dave straddling the bike at the rear, each of us holding a bag of groceries. In no time, we were on Rue Espangole, Ouanaminthe's main drag, headed home.

"Uh-oh," said Dave as we turned at the town square. He nodded toward the UN vehicles which were heading toward the border: two troop-movement trucks and an armored vehicle. "Lord, have mercy." I prayed though I don't recall if that line was out loud or not. Later, we heard no reports of violence.

Once in the apartment, I opened a package of newly purchased oat *galletas*. I wondered if I should feel guilty, eating groceries that others couldn't buy. I thought about the Amos passage about justice rolling down like waters, as another *galleta* rolled down my gullet. "Should I repent of my grocery purchase?" I said aloud. Dave was stowing TP, dish soap, and food items in cupboards. These items of a lower quality are sometimes available in Ouanaminthe but, when we can, we buy them in the DR. He didn't answer. There is no simple answer. How much should the wealthy, who come to serve the poor, contextualize economically? This past

week the team had no fresh produce served at meals. Why? A. The border was closed and Zoulit could not buy produce. B. Zoulit believes raw fruits and vegetables are a cholera exposure risk, even though the kitchen staff always washes produce in bleach water. The absence of produce made meals less satisfying, but how could we complain when Haitians were struggling to eat anything at all? Another example: air conditioning units are being installed in the guesthouse dorm rooms. For years, we have resisted this (largely with the desire that one-week teams should live more simply, moving toward what Haitians do throughout life). But when the AC went in on the UMC third floor, Americans felt a surge in energy, and then increased work output. For one-week visitors, why not provide as many comforts of home as feasible? Dave and I (and now Michele) are in a different category however. As longer-term workers, we intend to dig in deeper and hope to have a more profound, lasting effect. Obviously we need to learn language and cultural priorities to accomplish that. But how much do we need to match their poverty in order to have a common basis from which to speak?

I'm still not at peace with the justice issue as it plays out here. But I know our presence is heading us in the right direction toward proper stewardship of our resources. One step at a time, I pray God will show us where we should end up.

*He has told you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?*

*Micah 6:8*