

A Letter from Beyond Borders Director and Co-Founder David Diggs on Recent Protests in Haiti

You may have heard that widespread demonstrations over corruption and the skyrocketing cost of living shut down Port-au-Prince and other cities in Haiti this February.

While many demonstrations were peaceful, there were violent incidents reported. Eight people were killed, according to the Miami Herald, and dozens injured.

I want to share with you some of what is behind these protests so that you have a sense of why they are happening.

Initially a one-day demonstration was planned on Feb. 7th – an historic day in Haiti, when the dictatorship of Jean Claude Duvalier fell – to call for an end to impunity over corruption and the embezzlement of public funds by the current and previous governments and their political and business associates.

This call tapped into widespread frustration, however, over the skyrocketing cost of living, and demands quickly expanded to include the departure of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse.

The impact of this nationwide protest - known as 'Operation Lockdown Haiti' - on Beyond Borders' work varied greatly. In Port-au-Prince and Jacmel, nearly all of our work with grassroots, community-based leaders and organizations was severely curtailed for a week. But on Lagonav Island and in rural areas in the north, our work continued with minimal disruption.

The political and economic context of this protest has deep roots in Haiti: a longtime lack of transparency and accountability in state institutions, the extreme concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, and dependence on imported food, which grows ever more expensive as the value of Haiti's currency declines sharply.

Most Haitians are already victims of structural violence, born into an economic and social order that puts much of what they need out of reach. More than 60 percent of Haitians live in poverty, and a quarter live in extreme poverty on incomes that average less than \$1.25 U.S. per day.

Escalating economic pressure on those living in extreme poverty leads some parents to decide to part with one or more of their children and send them to live with other families where they are at risk of becoming enslaved.

As Haitians are compelled to take to the streets to be heard by leaders who they feel have betrayed them, it is important to remember that few if any nations on earth have endured a longer and more extreme history of exploitation and violence. That the nation even exists is a testament to the courage of Haiti's people.

And while it is clear that economic and political structures in Haiti are badly broken, there is much at the grassroots level that gives us hope. We see communities organizing themselves, gaining greater awareness, and working to overcome those forces that perpetuate injustice and human suffering.

It is a great honor to be in partnership with the Atlantic-Midwest Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame and to work alongside the extraordinary women and men of Haiti who are dedicated to transforming their communities from the bottom up.

We know that widespread lasting improvements at the national level depend upon the kind of sacrifices and commitment that we are witnessing among strong, grassroots, local leaders - and the continued solidarity of people like you.

The SSND-Beyond Borders partnership strengthens grassroots leaders by investing in their capacity to make Haiti a nation free of violence against women and children, where every child goes to a good school; where productive work empowers the poorest to lift themselves out of poverty, and where a culture of participatory servant leadership prevails.

With deep gratitude for your solidarity with Haiti,

David