

Field Report from Haiti

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

A popular saying in Haiti is that Haitians are 80% Catholic, 20% Protestant, and 100% voodoo. There are about 5,000 Haitian Muslims – but in a population of 10 million – Islam is all but invisible. For this reason, Haitian Imam Alif Lamrah was surprised to see Muslim aid organizations on the ground within days of last year's earthquake.

"To tell you the truth, I didn't expect that. But when I saw that there were Muslims helping too, that only encouraged me to know that the Muslims are active too. The Muslims are in the world doing something too. The Muslims are alive, you know?"

Muslims charities are alive in Haiti, but their presence is often imperceptible. An elementary school in the hard-hit area of Port au Prince known as Delmas 32 is funded by the UK-based organization Muslim Hands. The school's principal, Rony Pierre Octave, says Muslim Hands is focused on aid, not religion.

"They don't get into religion with me. They never ask me anything regarding religion. Their only concern is to help."

This was also the case at Le Main Tendre, an orphanage that's home to 32 kids in the neighborhood of Tabarre. It's run by a voodoo priest and priestess.

The small yard is crammed with kids, piles of bedding, dishes, furniture, and laundry. It's bound on one side by a plywood wall – built to keep the children out of the two-story building that was badly damaged during the earthquake.

For a year, orphanage directors André and Rosairemite Ismaite slept under a tin roof with their children. The Ismaites gradually made contact with different aid organizations, and help started to trickle in. Rosairemite only wishes it were more.

"If I got enough aid, I would take the older ones, I would make a passport for each one of the children, and take them to the Dominican Republic, to show them a better life for them not to come to this poverty."

For now, she's thankful for the help she gets from the Zakat Foundation, a Muslim American charitable organization based in Chicago. When she received the money in her account last fall, she was overjoyed and says her family's experience with the Zakat Foundation has been one hundred percent positive.

But this hasn't been the case with all faith-based groups they've met. Some Christian groups have insisted that the Ismaites convert to Christianity if they want to receive aid.

"There's a lot of different Christian pastors who came here with the aid to give, but they say they cannot give to me because I practice voodoo. So I told him, I say, 'That's ok, you can go with your stuff.' If you're giving aid, you should not select who you're giving it to. If everybody in need, you should give it to everybody just like the Muslims are doing."

Moustafa Osman is head of the UK-based Islamic Relief Worldwide, which runs three earthquake refugee camps in and around Port au Prince. Osman says his organization helps people based on need and it never proselytizes. He says media coverage of the devastation in Haiti compelled Muslims countries and organizations to give to a non-Muslim country.

"This also shows you how the mindset of the Muslims in general, with a country or people, have changed. If you look back to Bosnia, I remember it was extremely difficult to convince the Muslim constituency that it's ok for us to help non-Muslims. Now most of the supporters, they accept that as a fact."

Many Muslims believed their charity should be used only in Muslim communities. Islamic relief has been working hard to change this mentality. It's been running workshops throughout the Middle East – training smaller charities in international transparency and accounting procedures – and sharing with them their belief that Islam encourages giving to people in need, no matter what their religion.

Veteran aid worker Giovanni Cassani says this is for the better. Cassani is head of camps for the International Organization for Migration. He came to Haiti from his previous post in Sri Lanka, two weeks after the earthquake. He says he was surprised to see Muslim NGOs on the ground.

"Seeing them here was actually a sign of the fact that they have moved beyond the religious component, and they are serious about doing humanitarian work."

– *Reported by Jordana Gustafson for America Abroad*