Sacrifice Zone – Cité Soleil

Port-au-Prince, Haïti

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3. Location: Cité Soleil, Port-au-Prince, Haïti

4. Description of the sacrifice zone: Cité Soleil

Cité Soleil, one of the seven municipalities of Port-au-Prince, is a vastly poverty-stricken and densely overcrowded community inhabited by 300,000 to 500,000 people, who experience high levels of destitution, unemployment, pollution, food insecurity, lack of sanitation, and environmentally catastrophic conditions. Considered the largest and most insecure district in Haïti, Cité Soleil has become the receiving point of toxic commercial, household, and medical waste. Waste arrives from other sections of Port-au-Prince to Cité Soleil through canals or is shipped or trucked by national waste management services; upon arrival in Cité Soleil, it is left in the open canals that run through the district, where it sits and floods into the streets and into people’s homes, or it is thrown into open dumps where it is left uncovered, unmanaged and uncontrolled. The trash grows into mountains sometimes more than 3m high in the midst of residential areas where children live, play, and go to school.

Cité Soleil lies below sea level and is built over a wetland. Even during light rainfall, floods of toxic water invade houses, schools, and businesses, creating a high likelihood of infection from pests, parasites, and toxins. The government does not collect, remove, or dispose of the solid and liquid waste, which includes hazardous metals, plastics, organic matter, and chemicals, and does not manage it in accordance with international and national standards, thus maintaining the air, ground, and water in a constant state of pollution and threatening the security and health of all people in the community.

Neglected by the government and with limited access to adequate health and environmental education, residents reduce the volume of trash by burning it on a regular basis, generating hazardous smoke which dramatically affects the health of those who live among the trash-filled canals, trash heaps and trash fires.

The tragic environmental conditions and exposure to hazardous substances especially affect children, due to their poverty, diminished resilience, and developing bodies and minds. Children are prone to experience malnutrition, short and long-term diseases, psychological impairments, and cognitive impediments due to the high levels of water-borne toxins and air pollution; rates of cancer and severe asthma – as well as deadly vector, waterborne and infectious diseases, such as diarrhea, typhoid, worms, and dengue fever – are high, causing lifelong developmental and physical conditions, cognitive impairments, and premature death. Moreover, community children face continuous barriers to adequate access to food, clean water, education, and medical care, all of which deeply threaten their opportunities for healthy development and well-being. Residents have inadequate access to sanitation and medical services, as hospitals, healthcare centers and dispensaries are often inoperative, obsolete, and overcrowded.
In addition to the life-threatening environmental conditions, the government at the local and national levels has also exposed the children of Cité Soleil to high levels of personal insecurity. Children often fall prey to armed gangs, which, taking advantage of low education access for between 30 and 40 percent of children, recruit young gang members in exchange of money, food, sex, shelter, and protection.

5. Evidence that this sacrifice zone is contributing to human rights abuses or violations

The Government of Haiti is responsible for this situation and is aware of its implications on the human rights of residents, including children. These conditions could be alleviated simply with the adoption of sanitary trash removal and management practices – practices that are implemented throughout the world and in other parts of the country.

Yet the government has, for more than 10 years, entirely failed to protect the residents of Cité Soleil. It has failed to provide safe environmental conditions, including clean and safe water, healthy air, and fertile land, in violation of international, regional, and national human rights law. It has failed to introduce effective waste management programs and to rehabilitate Cité Soleil’s environmental conditions, thus infringing fundamental rights to health, life, dignity, education, water and sanitation, adequate housing, and a healthy environment.

Instead, the Government has sacrificed the residents of Cité Soleil by using their home as a permanent repository for toxic trash – all while supplying some form of waste and water treatment for residents who live outside of this poor and neglected zone. Adding insult to injury, funds destined for social development projects were misappropriated by the authorities. The recent assassination of the nation’s President has left the country in deeper chaos and further delayed any prospect of remedial action.

The combination of government programs that carelessly dump waste into the heart of Cité Soleil, and the absence of government programs to manage and remove the waste from the canals and streets, leaves the entire landscape of the district covered in trash. Without effective means of disposal, residents of Cité Soleil combat the mountains of trash by burning it. The combustion of waste releases toxic gasses into the atmosphere such as carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and soot particles.

Port-au-Prince has among the worst air quality in the world. Burning processes, such as commercial and municipal waste burning, produces dioxins. Dioxins are a group of highly toxic chemical compounds that can cause problems with reproduction, development, and the immune system. They can also lead to cancer and hormone disruption. Drinking water that has been contaminated by chemical waste or by other industrial processes can contain dioxins. Dioxins can be absorbed through skin contact with air, water, and soil. Toxic conditions are a way of life, which in multiple ways, violate their ability to live with dignity.

Furthermore, the raw sewage and wastewater contain bacteria, fungi, parasites, and viruses that can cause multiple infections. Bacteria can cause diarrhea, fever, vomiting, headache, loss of appetite, cramps and general weakness. Some of the bacteria and diseases carried by raw sewage and wastewater are: E. coli, shigellosis, typhoid fever, salmonella, cholera, and worms, such as Ascariasis (roundworm), which cause coughing and trouble breathing, a contributing factor to the high volume of citizens in Cité Soleil with respiratory illness.

Untreated water also spreads cholera, which spreads quickly when there is a lack of proper sewage treatment and symptoms such as the profuse diarrhea produced by cholera patients containing large amounts of the infection bacteria.
Conditions in Haiti violate the American Convention of Human Rights, which Haiti has signed and ratified, including both provisions that are immediately enforceable (including the right to life, to dignity, to equality, and rights of the child) and provisions that are enforceable progressively including environmental rights, as well as the Haitian constitution.

6. Efforts to clean up or rehabilitate the sacrifice zone

The Haitian government has ignored these conditions more than 10 years. Cité Soleil continues to lack waste services, and continues to serve as a dumping ground for waste from elsewhere. Local volunteers and leaders have attempted to rehabilitate the area by organizing community programs such as recycling and waste removal activities. One of the most prominent of these is SAKALA, a community center that provides a free and safe space for children, youth, and wider community members to gather and learn and play, to access healthy food and water, and to engage in several activities, such as gardening and growing vegetables and fruit, environmental stewardship, sports, arts, and entrepreneurial programs. By positively engaging youth in recreational activities and providing them access to basic services, SAKALA and similar organizations hope to reduce gang recruitment among young people and children and protect them from environmental degradation. Nonetheless, given the magnitude of environmental challenges in Cité Soleil, SAKALA and other local volunteer efforts are insufficient to counter the risks and vulnerabilities suffered by the members of the community. From time to time, residents’ groups organize to draw attention to the situation.

These efforts have been made significantly more difficult by the violent chaos that has engulfed Port-au-Prince and Cité Soleil since the election of President Jovenel Moïse; in the wake of his assassination in early July 2021, the insecurity has worsened and it has become impracticable if not impossible to venture outside due to the deeper levels of violence, disorder, and lawlessness that has taken hold of Haiti, all of which exacerbate the adverse environmental conditions in what has become a quintessential sacrifice zone. These conditions make it even less likely that the dignity of the residents of Cité Soleil will be restored.

7. References

1 The Petition involved assistance from students in the Dignity Rights Practicum at Widener University Delaware Law School, Wilmington Delaware, U.S., under the supervision of Professors Erin Daly and James R. May: Paige DeBell, Alicia Dugger, Joshua Dziczek, Chloe Hunter, Dominic Mallon, Jessica Ott, Madhuri Ray, and Uri Simms.