4-1-2010

Nicole Lee '02 Sees Failings in the Effort to Aid Victims of Haiti Earthquake

UB Law Forum

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol22/iss2/20

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in UB Law Forum by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.
Witness to the aftermath
Nicole Lee ’02 sees failings in the effort to aid victims of Haiti earthquake

The situation in Haiti, says Nicole Lee ’02, is dire. “I’ve worked around the world, and I’ve never seen anything like it,” reports Lee, who as president of TransAfrica Forum visited the earthquake-ravaged island nation on a difficult weeklong trip in mid-March. She was there to assess how well aid is being delivered to those displaced by the calamity — whether people’s needs for food, water, shelter and health care are being provided for.

What she found, she said, was that only “a small percentage” of the need is being met effectively. “The need is significant, and it’s not clear that money is actually being spent on the top priorities,” she said. For example, Lee said, tarps handed out as shelter will be of little use in the rainy season, and a sturdy four-person tent — available in the United States for around $70 — can go for as much as $500 on the black market in Haiti. Most shelter aid, she said, falls far short of the international standards for shelter.

Lee — who traveled with a driver and an interpreter, in a “really beat-up car” in order to keep a low profile — visited six camps for internally displaced persons, in the capital Port-au-Prince but also in the rural villages of Leogan, Delmas and Carrefour. In nearly all of them, she said, aid was inadequate because the major nongovernmental organizations were unwilling to enter the camps.

“The first priority of corporate NGOs is their own security,” she said. “You don’t want relief workers being kidnapped or harmed. Unfortunately, in this situation there’s an assumption that the people in the camps are inherently violent. And that is not true. There’s no evidence for that at all.

“There’s nothing in these camps,” Lee said: “The only thing keeping people alive are small NGOs and themselves. If one person has a bag of rice, they feed everybody until they run out, and then they try to figure out how to get more.”

Lee, whose husband is Haitian-American and who has lived in Haiti, said that despite the devastation, the human spirit remains strong. “The funny thing about Haiti,” she said, “is that everyone is always pristine. There’s no food there, no clean water, but there’s still a dry cleaner. People walk around with their heads held high, their clothes clean and pressed.”

But she is fuming about the inefficient delivery of life-sustaining assistance, and on her return arranged a full slate of meetings with members of Congress and people at the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development. As an independent observer, she said, she is in a position to give them a clear-eyed assessment of how well U.S. government aid — mostly funneled through NGOs — is being spent, and how it might be used more effectively. She also was planning a return trip to Haiti with other prominent observers.

The people she met who will stay with her, like the young Haitian woman who was working on community development issues in the artsy city of Gonaives. When the earthquake struck, she rushed home to find that her house had collapsed, killing her 22-month-old infant and her caretaker. In a daze, she walked to her husband’s office, only to find that it, too, had fallen, and he was dead. “She is still organizing in these camps,” Lee said. “She said, ‘My baby used to love going out and being around people. How could I stop doing something my baby loved so much?’

“As critical as I am of the international community,” Lee said, “I am so inspired by what the Haitian people have been able to do.”