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# As fire's death toll rises, so does desire for orphan care reform in Guatemala

PUBLISHED ON 13 MARCH, 2017 BY [RONNE ROCK](#)

Guatemala (MNN) — The death toll continues to rise in the wake of a tragic fire at a government orphanage near Guatemala City. As of Sunday, 40 girls have perished — and more children remain in critical condition in local hospitals.

Accusations continue to mount as a country mourns and families plead for answers. [Orphan Outreach's](#) Mike Douris says, in moments like this, it's essential to look at the true issues so wisdom may be used in bringing about lasting change in care for orphans and vulnerable children.

As the president of Orphan Outreach and a founding board member for the Christian Alliance for Orphans — an organization dedicated to equipping individuals and churches to better serve vulnerable children around the world — Douris is often called on to provide both wisdom and practical advice to governments and ministries. He recalls the conversation he and Guatemalan government leaders had more than a decade ago, as Hogar Seguro Virgen de la Asunción was being considered as a solution to the growing orphan care crisis.



(Photo courtesy of Orphan Outreach).

## A Complicated History of Orphan Care

“The whole history of Guatemala and kids is a complicated story,” Douris says. “The reality is that the government has not had the resources, or has not allocated resources to adequately care for the most vulnerable children in the country. During the time that adoptions were going on, lots of kids were being adopted out of Guatemala, but there was a lot of corruption and lack of transparency in that whole process. **But kids were moving out of the country, so there wasn't really a focus on building infrastructure *in* the country to care for kids.**”

Douris was invited to consult the country's leaders as they considered building a large facility on the outskirts of the nation's capital. "The administration actually approached me about supporting the building of the orphanage. I declined and expressed my concerns that therapeutically it would not be in the best interest of the children to have a large institution. The officials within the government didn't have a lot of experience in working with kids. It sounds like a great idea to someone who has not worked in the field of child care, that you can put all these kids in one place where you can focus your resources on them, consolidate management resources, and cut costs.... **But kids are not widgets or inventory that can be managed easily. The mental image of an idyllic children's home breaks down when the complex issues of trauma, abuse, mental illness, and attachment disorder collide with juvenile offenders, gang members, trafficked children, babies, and severely mentally challenged children.**"

The original orphanage on the site was San Gabriel, a former juvenile detention facility that had been modified to include boys who were homeless and those who had been rescued from abuse. Douris says that facility was very underfunded and poorly run. "There was a great amount of abuse and poor supervision in the home. The property it sat on was a large tract of land and the government decided to build on that land and consolidate several of their children's homes at this one location."



(Image courtesy of Orphan Outreach)

The government chose to house teens on juvenile probation and gang members with children who had been removed from families due to abuse and neglect. Children with significant development and emotional delays were also added to the mix. Douris says the facility was grossly underfunded. It also became the place where children went when judges could not find openings in privately run children's homes. In addition, many families who were having difficulty with their children would send them to the government home, and many of those children had various diagnosis and family issues.

He continues, "They didn't have enough employees that were actually supervising the children, they were untrained, the government wasn't paying a lot of money so they couldn't get qualified workers."

**When adoptions closed in 2008, children got stuck in the system.** The court system and a newly implemented central authority were overwhelmed and unprepared. Guatemala had no real adoption or foster care system, nor the infrastructure to manage orphans. This exasperated an already difficult situation at Hogar Seguro Virgen de la Asunción. A facility that was built to care for 400 children had, at times, as many as 900 children.

## Band-aids on a Gaping Wound

Douris was invited back to visit the home in 2016 to offer insight on best practices for orphan care because of the ongoing challenges. He shares, “We walked into this one dormitory that had 70 or 80 kids in it that was designed for half that much. There was one worker in the building, and that worker was watching TV. The kids were pretty much on their own with very little supervision. You could tell just by looking at the campus — it was fairly new, but the buildings were already significantly damaged and maintenance had not been kept up — that it was not a healthy environment for kids.

**“We engaged the government and tried to get them to do a full evaluation of the home. In our discussions, it was obvious there were significant issues in how the program was managed, notwithstanding the significant issues of the overall child protective system, of which the home was a worrying symptom.**

“A major issue was the government didn’t have control over their personnel. Between presidential administrations, the employees unionized so the government lost the flexibility to manage the staff. They didn’t provide the financial resources that were needed to actually run the home adequately. Since the opening of the home, administration after administration had put band-aids on a gaping wound, and then passed the problem onto the next administration. It was a disaster waiting to happen, and there were significant warning signs for years.”

Stories of abuse, neglect, and violence were common at the home. In 2013, a girl was murdered, and several months ago, attention was focused on poor conditions after a group of girls ran away.

Then last week, a group of approximately 60 teenage girls fled during the night. Most of the girls were found and returned by police, who then detained them in a single facility on campus.

**Douris shares, “The girls, obviously upset and angry, started acting out. One of the girls apparently had matches and lit a mattress on fire. Some have reported that [the] girls were yelling to get out. By the time authorities responded, it was too late.” Nineteen girls died inside the dorm; 21 more have since passed away due to injuries sustained in the incident.**



Douris says, “As the forensics of how the incident happened are studied, it will become clear that it was a complex web of lack of leadership to address the underlining problems of the child protection system as a whole. At the home, you had untrained staff who lost control of the campus. Then you had police come in to gain control who also don’t have a lot of experience in working with kids like this, and one bad decision after another ends up in tragedy.”

## A Global Struggle

The struggle with providing care for orphans and vulnerable children is a common one around the world. “There have been tragedies like this in different countries,” Douris reflects. “The common theme is neglect and not allocating proper resources to care for kids. That happens also in Western countries. We can look at our own country and our foster care system. It is woefully underfunded. We see the results in our prisons; we have a high percentage of prisoners who are graduates of our foster care system. We should not just look at Guatemala with a critical eye without looking at ourselves and say, ‘What are we doing for the kids who are most vulnerable?’

**“It’s been said that a country is defined by how they treat the ‘least of these’. Kids and orphans are the least of these, and how we care for them is a reflection of what our values are.** I think that’s one reason the Lord defines religion as ministering to widows and orphans in their distress because it reflects His nature of loving those who are most vulnerable. And I think it also reflects the values of a country.”

He continues, “When a crisis happens, many times we look at how we fix a particular incident or program. But I think the government and those working on this in Guatemala need to look at a broader systemic focus. What happened at the government orphanage is one symptom of a much larger and complex problem. Right now, foster care in Guatemala is in its infancy. Because there’s not a lot of foster care available, there is too much dependence on residential care. Permanency is beginning to get a focus and family reunification is becoming a priority, but again, it is underfunded with little follow-up once a child is placed back with family.

“The judicial system is also beginning to function better, but without treatment alternatives, the kids end up where there is an empty bed and their case gets stuck in the system. There has been a growing movement in Guatemala and around the world to close residential care and this incident will undoubtedly fuel those voices. I am not one of those voices, I feel Guatemala needs more options for children and the goal should not be closing residential care but to develop more options for children. The over-dependency on residential care will decrease with more options available for judges to care for the needs of children. **My position is that we need all of it, and what needs to drive the care of children is the needs of children.**



(Image courtesy of Orphan Outreach)

## **“Being a voice means taking responsibility”**

**“My personal view is that it has to be a partnership between the private and public sectors, and the Church should play a major role in being a voice and advocate for these kids.** But being a

voice also means taking responsibility. I think the Church in Guatemala has the opportunity be a living example of God’s heart for the orphan, and recognize that He wants them involved in this issue. Practically, that means pastors and leaders in the church coming alongside members considering adoption and being foster parents.

“The Church needs to be intentional about orphan ministry by serving and providing resources to children’s programs to help the quality of care, that the Church considers providing ministry to families who have adopted or are fostering, that they develop resources for children who have been abused or children who have been trafficked. There are so many ways for the Church to provide concrete ministry and to be a voice for the voiceless. The Church is not only mandated, but it is part of its DNA to step up and put time, energy, resources, and talent to addressing the needs of these kids and do it with excellence.

**“With unity of purpose, the government, private sector, and the Church must embrace the complexity of the issue of care for children with compassion, humility, and wisdom if there’s going to be significant improvement.”**

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*Tomorrow, Mike Douris shares how the Church in Guatemala is being invited to have that voice for change in its country, and how the Church in the United States can also be part of the solution in providing care for orphans and vulnerable children. You can [work alongside Orphan Outreach and its Guatemalan ministry partners right now](#) to help provide for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of children who were witnesses to the tragedy at the government home.*

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- Primary Language: Spanish
- Primary Religion: Christianity
- Evangelical: 24.4%

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## Call to action

- Pray for the children, workers, and administrators and the affected facility in Guatemala, that there would be healing and reform.

- Ask God to come close to orphans and vulnerable children in Guatemala who are suffering or who feel neglected.
- Support the 'least of these' by coming alongside ministries like Orphan Outreach.

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