

OUANAMINTHE, Haiti, 11 March 2011— Small dirt paths dot the lush and hilly landscape outside the town of Ouanaminthe, on Haiti's north-eastern border. It is just one of a number of remote crossings child traffickers use to smuggle children into the Dominican Republic.

UNICEF is working with the Haitian government and non-governmental partners to combat child trafficking. As part of this, the United Nations police force (UNPOL) recently began patrolling these unofficial borders.

The scale of the problem becomes evident while accompanying the police on patrol. Hundreds of miles of border are inaccessible by car, and a lack of resources limits UNPOL's foot patrols.

"It's a bigger problem than you would think," says UNPOL policeman Andre Perrin Child. "Trafficking happens every day, and the controls are almost non-existent."

More than 2,000 Haitian children were trafficked into the Dominican Republic in 2009. With families thrown into disarray and many made poorer by last year's devastating earthquake, the temptation to send children to Haiti's wealthier neighbour in search of work has become even stronger.

Patrolling the borders

On patrol near the village of Capotille, UNPOL receives word that two children have been found abandoned by traffickers. A local family is looking after the children, but is too poor to care for them permanently. UNICEF Child Protection Specialist Gallianne Palayret goes with UNPOL to retrieve the children.

Once there, the children – Marie, 8, and Francisco, 4, (not their real names) – hesitantly take hold of Palayret's hand and are taken to the UNICEF-supported Haitian Police's 'Brigade de Protection des Mineurs', or Child Protection Brigade. Brigade members have the authority to search vehicles and prevent children without papers from crossing the border.

Marie and Francisco say they were travelling with a man who abandoned them after being rumbled trying to cross into the Dominican Republic. Palayret asks about their parents in the hope that he can reunite them.

"From preliminary information we could gather from the children, we think their parents are illegal migrants in the Dominican Republic," she says. "What happened is that they paid someone to bring their children to the Dominican Republic to be united. "

Care for children

Marie and Francisco are taken to a welcome centre that provides temporary care for trafficking child victims. Run by civil society organization Soeurs Saint Jean, this is one of several care centres that receive UNICEF support. Marie and Francisco are shy at first, but encouraged by

the smiles of the social worker, they soon join other children at a play table.

Palayret tries to reunite children with their families whenever it is in their best interest. "Children have a right to be protected and to grow up in a nurturing environment," she says. "When this is not possible, we try to place children in longer-term residential care centres where their dignity and worth is respected and nurtured."

The welcome centre will continue to provide Marie and Francisco some stability and comfort while authorities search for their parents.

Source: [Relief Web](#)