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**PRESS RELEASE**

May 6, 2015

*Hear The Children's Cry:*

**PARTNERSHIPS, INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT KEY**

**IN FIGHTING SCOURGE OF MISSING CHILDREN**

- *Islandwide Consultation garners strong support, produces significant proposals*
- *Visiting international expert impressed; sees need for establishing procedures, committed to offering help*

After 13 years of intensive work to protect Jamaica's children, especially those most vulnerable, and six years focusing specifically on the complex of issues surrounding missing children, Hear The Children's Cry has taken its critical campaign of research, advocacy and practical support programmes to yet another level. This has involved the launch this month of the **National Missing Children's Awareness Week**. Conceived as an annual event, it seeks to battle what the organization deplores as widespread lack of understanding, lack of urgency and a general lack of institutional will for implementing critical solutions to some of the many contributing factors exacerbating this national crisis.

Undaunted by the fact that the drying up of many funding sources has seen a number of other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) having to close down, Hear The Children's Cry was able to inspire major support from three concerned private sector bodies, to make a serious difference this week. Jamaica Yellow Pages, which continues to be the major supporter of the Missing Children's Support Programme run by Hear The Children's Cry, sponsored the visit of a distinguished international expert; the Sandals Foundation provided, free of cost, a beautiful venue in Ocho Rios for a ground-breaking all day national Stakeholder's Consultation, complete with meals and audio visual facilities; and the Christian Foundation of Tony and Jean Williamson, The Cup of Blessing Foundation, made a significant monetary contribution to help cover local travel, materials production and other necessary costs. In addition to these major sponsors, a number of other caring Jamaicans have contributed in other ways.

The result has so far seen a unique collaboration at the **Missing Children’s Stakeholder’s Consultation** at Sandals Grande Hotel in Ocho Rios on Tuesday May 5. Every region of the island was represented as a total of 60 professionals and concerned citizens gathered to share perspectives, seek solutions and collaborate on a number of far reaching proposals.

There was a strong contingent from the Jamaica Constabulary Force, including representatives of the Missing Persons Call Centre operated by the Constabulary Communication Network (CCN), the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB) and the Centre for the Investigation of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse (CISOCA). Other government representatives attending included guidance counselors, teachers, education officers and others from the Ministry of Education, personnel from the Office of the Children’s Advocate (OCA), the Office of the Children’s Registry (OCA) and the National Parenting Support Commission.

They were joined by persons from a number of NGOs, the Jamaica Social Workers Association, representatives of various churches, and the parent of a former missing child (several parents were invited but the others were unable to attend).

Special guest presenter Katia Dantas, Policy Director for Latin America and the Caribbean with the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) says she was impressed by the commitment demonstrated by those attending – a commitment to listening to each other and to finding solutions.

“From listening to what is going on in Jamaica now,” she says, “We see that there is a need for some processes to be established, a general procedural meeting, who does what when, and how. So that one of the things that will be a challenge moving forward is creating a Missing Children Strategy in the country. The beautiful thing part of it is that there is the commitment, and I have been approached by different organizations for collaboration – you are on the right track!”

The International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children is a leading global movement to protect children from sexual exploitation and abduction. It empowers and equips global partners - in government, academia, law enforcement, private industry and the non-government

organization (NGO) community - to make the world a safer place for children. Its world headquarters is in Virginia, USA, while Ms. Dantas' regional programme is based in Brazil.

Ms. Dantas notes that the ICMEC wants Jamaica to be part of its Global Missing Children's Network, and that her organization would be happy to offer practical assistance to Jamaica's efforts to protect its children. This could include things like reviewing proposed legislation, and sharing solutions implemented in countries with similar challenges. She says she also hopes Jamaica will help by collaborating on continuing efforts to assess the extent of the missing children challenge in the Caribbean.

Hear The Children's Cry Founder Betty Ann Blaine, who presented a comprehensive Situational Analysis of Jamaica's Missing Children's Crisis, notes, "The visit of Ms. Dantas represents an important opportunity for Jamaica to make significant links and partnerships with organizations and individuals who are grappling with many of the problems we are faced with too. Hear The Children's Cry recognizes that we need international support, and we welcome the 'best practices' models that can be shared."

Following Ms. Dantas' Guest Presentation at today's press conference (Wednesday May 6 at Jamaica Yellow Pages board room) Mrs. Blaine and her team will host the visitor as she has a number of individual meetings with key stakeholders working to protect children. Ms. Dantas has also been taking part in a series of awareness raising media interviews. She departs for Brazil on Thursday afternoon May 7.

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