

Kantamanto Fire Relief Fund Report

Prepared by The Or Foundation on September 1st, 2021

“The fire disaster happened in December and since it was Christmas season – the peak season of our work – our losses were very high. The support that was given to us gave us some assurance because we had lost hope, some had lost all faith. We didn’t even get help from the government. The support you gave us helped us in our various reconstruction projects, some of us were able to fix or replace our machines and get materials to resume our work. The support has pushed even those who were quitting the work to reconsider. Personally, with my little savings and the money from you, I have been able to purchase a new sewing machine. Moreover, most of my friends here that I have spoken to – some of them were struggling financially to the point they could barely feed themselves and their families. We are very appreciative.”

— John, Tailor and Lane Leader

A Christmas Fire

Late in the night on December 15th, 2020, market retailers and tailors started receiving calls. “Come quick,” was the message, the market was on fire. Members of the Kantamanto Market community risked their lives to pull whatever materials they could out of the path of destruction, but the fire tore through the mostly wood structures of a section of the market, destroying over 200 businesses, decades of hard work and hundreds of thousands of dollars of secondhand clothing. This was no accident. Our investigation yielded a reliable source who could confirm rumors that the fire was set intentionally by real estate developers seeking to oust market retailers and tailors from valuable land in the center of Accra, a rapidly growing metropolis and capital city of Ghana, along the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa.



A retailer rakes through piles of burnt clothes, while the community recovers from the shock of the loss.

Ghana is the third largest importer of secondhand clothing in the world, disproportionate to its place as the 46th most populous country. Kantamanto Market sees 15 million items of secondhand clothing every single week. It is likely the largest secondhand clothing market in the world, responsible for the recirculation of far more garments than any technology enabled resale platform in the Global North. And leading up to Christmas, especially after a difficult year with COVID lockdowns, rising costs and consumer fear over imported secondhand goods containing coronavirus, retailers were placing their bets that the holiday season would get them back on track financially. With extra inventory in storage in anticipation of holiday shopping, the disaster could not have struck at a worse time for the community already teetering on the edge financially. Although the fire was contained to only a small portion of the 5,000 stall market, the devastation it caused was enormous for the people impacted.

When our team arrived the next day to survey the damage and learn how we could be of assistance, we saw people sorting through clothing that was still on fire, attempting to salvage anything of value. We saw loan collectors seeking repayment now that retailers' collateral had gone up in smoke. We knew the community did not have stockpiled resources to support the recovery effort and to pay off debt collectors, but we saw the determination to rebuild.

Kantamanto Fire Relief Fund Report

The Vice President of Ghana also surveyed the damage and promised to help. Government officials offered to clear the area of debris if the retailers would leave behind their belongings and vacate their stall locations. Retailers and tailors who had worked for years to re-circulate and up-cycle clothing did not want to leave their place of business, even if there was no structure left. They knew that wealthy and well-connected interests were after the land, so they stood by, at the site of their smouldering stalls, determined not to lose the only thing they did have left: their community and marketplace in Kantamanto.

To be clear, retailers and tailors were unified in the message that they did want to relocate during the cleanup effort because they feared that once the rubble had been removed, the retailers would never be allowed back on the site, and instead the land would be given to a real estate developer looking to build a modern mall. Even when our team offered to help coordinate waste hauling with the municipal authority, retailers and tailors insisted they would clean up the burnt debris themselves. Not knowing who to trust and too in debt to give up their business and livelihood, they were determined to remain and rebuild. They would not be forced off.



A young woman working as a kayayo (head porter) surveys the damage as she tries to collect anything salvageable.

This Is A Supply Chain Disaster

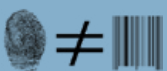
If you do not live in Accra this fire likely feels far away and disconnected from your reality. Why should you care?

The intentional blaze that tore through 200 stalls in Kantamanto Market is a fashion supply chain disaster. While many people in the Global North think of the secondhand economy as charity, or as ‘recycling’, these conceptions privilege the perspective of “the sender” and tell an incomplete story, one that stops us from thinking critically about the secondhand trade. The secondhand economy is a supply chain, it is the primary supply chain for over half of the global population, including many Ghanaians.

Kantamanto Market plays an important role within the fashion industry more broadly, acting as an open valve for continued overproduction and overconsumption in the Global North. Without the gratifying idea that you can give your old clothes away to people who need them, it is difficult to imagine buying more clothes when your closet is overflowing. But the reality is that secondhand clothing is not charity. The majority of the items donated to local charity shops and thrift stores in the Global North, such as Goodwill, end up being shipped to markets like Kantamanto, where retailers buy bales of clothing, site unseen (the garments are compressed and wrapped in opaque plastic and wire), for anywhere from US \$25 to US\$500 per bale. The business of collecting, sorting and shipping secondhand clothes around the world is very much a for-profit enterprise, and the clothing, whether it is donated by well intentioned individuals or dumped by brands to clear their racks of deadstock that didn’t sell, is a commodity like any other, traded for a profit.

Once in Kantamanto clothes are re-commodified. First they are sorted into selections based on quality, style, fabric type and fit. Most bales contain at least 200 pieces of clothing, but on average retailers might only be able to sell 36 pieces as first selection for which a customer could pay anywhere from three to ten dollars. The lower quality, slower moving items, which generally make up the majority of an average bale might be perfectly wearable, but among the massive quantity of clothes are simply undesirable because of small defects or ill-fit. In the best of cases retailers pay neighboring tailors to mend and alter some of the second and third selection pieces to make them more desirable for customers.

Yet despite the best efforts of retailers and tailors, on average 40% of every bale ends up leaving the market as waste. There is simply too much clothing for every garment to find a new life. Why would a customer buy a second selection item if a new bale is being opened right next door with the first selection to pick through? They won’t.



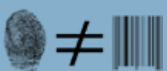
You wouldn't either. And retailers are too far in debt (less than 20% make a profit on the average bale) to rehabilitate all of the lower quality garments. Such a large portion of what retailers buy in a bale won't be sold because the secondhand market sits within the landscape of the global fast fashion industry, for which excess is part of the business. Kantamanto makes clear that debt is a core cause of fashion's waste crisis. The same brands that cancelled orders during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving factory owners and garment workers in debt for work already completed, are the brands that make up the bulk of the clothing that flows through Kantamanto Market, where retailers go into debt in order to buy bales. Big fashion has leveraged debt across the lifecycle of clothing to trap people, from garment workers and secondhand retailers to cotton farmers and consumers, in a cycle of exploitation and dependence.

The fire in Kantamanto is not unlike the catastrophic fires elsewhere throughout fashion's supply chain. Too much clothing. Too many corners cut. Not enough solidarity. Not enough justice.

Luckily no one was seriously injured or killed in the fire. But the damage was not limited to only materials and tools for which retailers and tailors had paid dearly. Our team found that at least two people were rushed to the hospital after suffering heart attacks. One person suffered from a stroke. One woman became mentally unstable. Several decided never to return. "It's like starting life all over again," said one retailer who had worked in Kantamanto for 29 years before the blaze struck.

The market structures were built through collective effort but with few financial resources. With mostly wood for construction materials and essentially no fire protection whatsoever, amidst the dust from combustible fabrics, Kantamanto has long been known as a fire hazard, but there has been no support to address the issue in a way that serves the interests of the existing market community. Conversations to renovate the market mostly center around foreign-owned, consolidated real estate firms and shopping mall developers, who would almost certainly force out the many thousands of people cobbling together some form of a living in Kantamanto today. These fears are not ungrounded. After all, someone lit a match.

While Kantamanto plays a critical role in clothing millions of people and serving as an outlet valve for the big fashion houses oversupplying the global clothing market, Kantamanto has received no investment from the major players within the global fashion industry, neither from the brands that create the material that retailers pay to resell, nor from the charities, collectors and exporters in the Global North. Retailers, tailors and the peripheral businesses are left to fend for themselves under pressure from banks, real estate developers and an ever more discerning, globally connected customer.



Kantamanto Fire Relief Fund Report

Even as clothing waste from foreigners piles up, driving retailers into debt and costing the city of Accra hundreds of thousands of dollars every year to collect and landfill just a portion, no major fashion brand has offered a nickel to support retailers build more secure structures or to clean up the mess for which the clothing brands are ultimately responsible through their overproduction. This lack of accountability for major brands based in the Global North is par-for-the-course in big fashion's supply chain operations, which builds on the extractive legacy of colonial exploitation.



A woman working as a kayayo (head porter) carries a bale of secondhand clothing through the debris of the fire. Bales continued to circulate in the market even as retailers and tailors surveyed the damage.

Relief Fund

From the moment the fire started it was clear that those who were impacted would find a way to move forward. The Kantamanto community has proven their resilience many times before – during previous crises and in their everyday work. But their resilience is not an excuse to do nothing. The resilience of vulnerable communities should be honoured, but it must not be romanticized.

To observe and report on the fire and not to offer support to the victims is simply unethical. As an organization calling for transparency in the secondhand supply chain, we believe that transparency is meaningless without action based on the uncovered truths. We couldn't continue to work within the Kantamanto community, raising money to advance solutions to the material waste crisis while doing nothing to respond to this immediate crisis. We conferred with our board and closest advisors, including trusted retailers in Kantamanto. The consensus was that support was urgently necessary. The only real questions were how we would raise funds and how we would disseminate them.

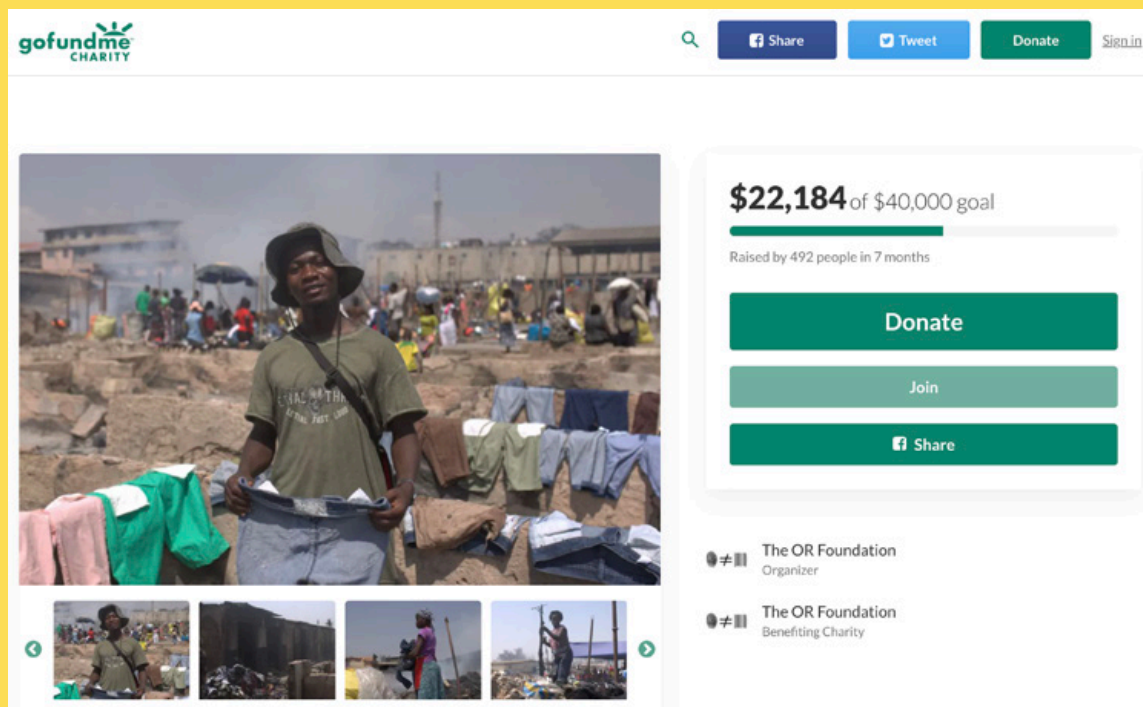
Our team, spearheaded by Joshua and Al-Fattah, worked with lane leaders in the area impacted by the fire to collect the names and contact information of the individuals impacted by the fire. The lane leaders function as organizers amongst their peers, convening groups for meetings, collecting fees and ensuring communication about specific events within the market. They play a key role within the mutual aid network of Kantamanto and played a key role in our effort to distribute funds. We cross-referenced the handwritten lists of names and contact details from lane leaders with names that our team gathered from interviews in the market. We then digitized all of the information for easier reference and backup.

After we had a list of affected individuals and their contact details, we reached out to various actors based in the Global North who play a role within the global secondhand business in an effort to raise funds from businesses that are directly connected to the work performed by the fire victims. No one offered support. Nor did the government of Ghana. The promise from the Vice President to support retailers and tailors was not realized.

Without support from the larger supply chain or from the government, it was clear that we would need to make a more public appeal to raise funds. We met with community partners and creative collaborators such as Sel from The Slum Studio, Mawuli from DeFortyFive and Molly from Osei Duro to coordinate a public campaign. On January 29th we launched a GoFundMe charity campaign and began to spread the word through our Instagram

Kantamanto Fire Relief Fund Report

with sharable content for our partners to disseminate as well. By March 5th our community had raised roughly US \$20,000 through GoFundMe. We are particularly grateful to Aja Barber and her community for rallying with nearly \$10,000 in donations. We are also grateful for The Slow Factory Foundation for paying us to present on their Open Edu series, funds which we directed to the fire relief effort. In addition to what was raised publically, our team was able to raise US \$5000 by March 29th through speaking fees and free-lance work, rounding out the \$25,000 that we sent to Ghana.



The screenshot displays a GoFundMe charity page. At the top left is the 'gofundme CHARITY' logo. On the right, there are buttons for 'Share', 'Tweet', 'Donate', and 'Sign in'. The main content area features a large photo of a man in a green t-shirt and a bucket hat standing in a market area with damaged buildings in the background. To the right of the photo, a progress bar shows '\$22,184 of \$40,000 goal' with the text 'Raised by 492 people in 7 months'. Below the progress bar are three buttons: 'Donate', 'Join', and 'Share'. At the bottom of the page, there are two entries for 'The OR Foundation', one as 'Organizer' and one as 'Benefiting Charity'. Below the main image are four smaller images showing various scenes of the market and relief efforts.

The GoFundMe charity campaign has continued to raise money beyond the initial US \$20,000 raised by March 5th. Additional funds will be allocated to upfit more lanes throughout the impacted section of the market with metal roofing and paved alleyways.

Disbursement

We transferred the \$25,000 to our Ghanaian bank account on April 1st. Our plan was to send 700 Ghana Cedis (\$120-\$125 USD depending on exchange rate), each to 200 different people via mobile money services. Prior to sending any money, Chloe and Sammy from our team called each recipient, not only to confirm details, but also to check in. These one-on-one conversations proved vitally important in establishing the trust and respect necessary for community building work.

We explained to recipients where the money was coming from and learned more about their situation. The gratitude even in the face of such a challenge was truly humbling for our team. One dressmaker who had worked in Kantamanto for 32 years prior to losing her shop in the fire said, “God bless you for having us in mind. Even if it was one Cedi, it would mean more than you know because we have received so many promises, but you are the only group that has been able to help us in this difficult time. Thank you very much.” We also heard how the situation had forced retailers and tailors deeper into debt and changed their business practices.

One retailer who has worked in Kantamanto for 20 years told us, “Right now I don’t have enough money to buy a full bale. What I do now is buy third selection from other retailers. It isn’t much but it’s what I can afford now.” A dressmaker unable to afford a new sewing machine, said that she has resorted to helping other dressmakers cut patterns. Another dressmaker lost her tools and her records of what her customers owed her. “It’s been really difficult since the fire. And what’s worse is I lost my loan books which contain the amounts people owe me and when they are due. I don’t know how I’m going to get my money back.”

Everyone we spoke with was deeper in debt as a result of the fire, yet retailers and tailors pooled their collective resources, including the money we were disbursing, and took out further loans in order to rebuild the market themselves.

Despite the need and the gratitude for the relief fund, the disbursement effort was not easy. Many people had changed phone numbers or could no longer afford a phone. Some people had moved or left the market. Our team visited the market multiple times a week to confirm details and track down the people on our list, but we did not disperse money while physically in the market at the request of lane leaders who felt this might add to the tension. The majority of the funds were sent via mobile money on a cell phone outside of the market space.

Kantamanto Fire Relief Fund Report

We disbursed the first funds on April 10th and did not finish the last disbursement until June 30th. We were able to disburse funds to the first 100 people in three weeks, but the next 50 people took an additional three weeks and the next 30 people took an additional two weeks to confirm due to people being inaccessible or changing phone numbers. We spent three weeks looking for the remaining 20 people and were only able to find five of them. In total 15 people remain who have not yet received funds from our original list of 200 people, but we decided to give funds to an additional seven people who were not on our original list, but who we had met through the disbursement process and who it was clear had been impacted by the fire.

In total we disbursed US \$125 to 192 people. We discussed with the lane leaders what to do with the remaining US \$1,000 from our original \$25,000 crisis relief fund. The lane leaders considered trying to use the funds to install electricity in the space. We helped investigate this possibility, but when Chloe visited the Electric Company of Ghana's office and it became clear that such a project would not move forward without a significant bribe to ECG officials, we asked the lane leaders to come up with another plan. Lane leaders decided to prepare part of the market for the rainy season as this would benefit all. So the \$1,000 has been used to level and pave the walkway of lane 16 A and B in order to reduce mud and to cover aiseways with a tin roof. The lane leaders meet with Chloe every other week to give an update on their progress and needs. We will continue to support the upfitting of additional lanes within the market as we continue to raise funds.

We agreed that should we find any of the original 15 remaining people on our list, as an organization we could afford to pull from our organizational budget and from the donations that have come in since March on GoFundMe in order to give them \$125.



Retailers, tailors and mobile water sellers, among other ancillary vendors, are back at work in the rebuilt market.

What We Learned

Through our conversations with fire victims we gained a clearer understanding of the magnitude of the materials lost in the fire. At least 190 sewing machines and at least 856 bales of secondhand clothing were destroyed. That is over \$250,000 in losses just in machines and bales. Countless finished garments, such as school uniforms and upcycled creations, along with at least hundreds of yards of handwoven kente cloth, batik and wax print fabrics were also burned. Food vendors, barbers and other family businesses selling sewing notions and accessories lost everything as well. It was clear that despite the collective effort to rebuild, the fire had also fueled distrust and competition among certain community members, now struggling for a basic subsistence income. But we also saw that the disbursement of funds helped reestablish some of that trust, especially between lane leaders and community members. For community members to see that lane leaders helped us connect with nearly every single person directly impacted by the fire, and that fellow community members were transparent about loss and needs, reassured the individuals impacted by the fire that their community was supportive and working for the collective benefit, even as individuals struggled to make ends meet.

The disbursement also helped establish a deeper trust between members of the Kantamanto Market community and our team with The Or Foundation. We firmly believe that directly giving funds with no strings attached is the most effective way of showing support. We make no comment about how individuals should spend their money. We require no documentation or reporting back. We trust that however each individual utilizes the \$125 we were able to give is the best use of that money. And this in turn has helped community members trust us. “Thank you for your help. I wondered if there was a catch or if it was a loan. I’m relieved to hear that it’s from a group of kind people. God bless you all,” said one tailor who had worked in the market for ten years before losing his shop in the fire.

We’ve had conversations with fire victims about why people from the Global North would give money to their cause, strengthening an understanding among secondhand retailers and tailors about the role they play in the global secondhand trade and within the fashion industry more broadly. The consistent follow up from our team, visiting with the same retailers multiple times a week for months, forged strong bonds and helped establish a more open dialogue around money and the precarious nature of the secondhand clothing trade that Kantamanto retailers are facing. We spoke with impacted community members about why the losses they sustained were not their fault and that they should not feel ashamed as many of them expressed. We also learned through conversations with the fund recipients that the impact of the money we were able to give reached not only the retailers and

Kantamanto Fire Relief Fund Report

tailors working to rebuild their businesses, but also the people who work with them, such as apprentices, cleaners and security guards, who in some cases were able to resume their employment due to the funds we gave. And we experienced the generosity of a community in return. In addition to kind words of appreciation, community members made our team shoes and hats. It was a humbling experience with every interaction bringing us back into a space of gratitude and trust.

Through dispersing these funds we have learned the true meaning of “crisis relief” – we could hear, see and feel the retailers and tailors shed a layer of anxiety, their bodies literally changing shape as tension was released, when we sent them their money. While the amount was not much, it was powerful for the community to know that there are people who respect what they do and who care. Crisis relief is not what justice looks like, but being there for one another in times of need sure gives us hope that justice is possible.



Thank you to everyone who donated, shared and assisted on the ground. We appreciate you!

How We Will Do Better Next Time

Though we are proud of this relief effort, we know there is room for improvement in how we conducted the effort. First and foremost is the timeliness of disbursement. Reaching people in a crisis becomes increasingly difficult overtime. We failed to track down the last 15 fire victims, in part because we were doing so more than six months after the fire. We need to move quicker next time (though we hope there isn't a next time, we expect that there will be), but we also value balancing speed with the time it takes to have meaningful conversations, build trust, and go about the work in partnership with the community.

One area where we can make up time is by having funds in reserve to begin disbursement efforts ahead of or in conjunction with public fundraising campaigns. More on that below.

Another way to expedite the disbursement of funds is to have contact information for retailers, tailors and other market vendors already on file so that we know who to contact right away, and we don't have to spend time gathering basic contact information. We are currently working with lane leaders and associations across the market to establish a digital database of such information.

We didn't do as good of a job as we would have liked in terms of reaching the security guards, cleaners and other community members who don't have fixed stalls within the market and who often don't have cell phones, but who were significantly impacted by the fire. In the event of a future crisis relief effort, we will concentrate more on reaching the less documented people.

We also hope to establish more thorough communication with our donor community. With the limited bandwidth of our team, we prioritized the disbursement effort and communication with fund recipients, but we need to strengthen our communication with the people who have donated funds or shared messages of support through social media and other platforms. While we are committed to doing better with this communication next time (though we don't want there to be a next time), we hope that in the meantime this report is a step in that direction.

This effort has made clear that an ongoing fund for crisis relief work within the Kantamanto Market secondhand clothing ecosystem is critically necessary. While we are not a crisis relief organization, we are committed to supporting the community we are a part of and that forms the basis for much of our work. Crisis relief is part of that support. Be it the distribution of funds to purchase food during COVID lockdowns (you can read more about that effort [here](#)), money to rebuild after a fire, or funds to pay hospital bills and rent (something we do regularly), we believe there is an obligation to support.

Secondhand Solidarity Fund

During Secondhand September 2021 we are moving our Secondhand Solidarity fund to DonorBox for increased transparency and awareness.

Kantamanto Market is a keystone in the global secondhand clothing trade. As secondhand clothing and resale grow in popularity through the calls for circularity and sustainability in fashion, so too must solidarity across the supply chain. As an organization we have always donated speaking fees and press publication fees to crisis relief work. If we are paid speaking fees to share about the lessons we've learned from the Kantamanto community, it is only right that we redirect that money back to the Kantamanto community without any strings attached. Before the last year this was not much money, so we did not have a formal system for this type of crisis relief. We would pay hospital bills or provide debt relief here and there, as we were able and as the need arose. But since 2020 not only has the need for crisis relief intensified, we have also been asked to speak at more forums. With COVID quarantines forcing more conferences and educational workshops online, the opportunities to share our work and stories from Kantamanto have grown. Importantly more of these opportunities than ever before are now paid, in large part because of the push for payment that came through the Black Lives Matter movement. Such speaking engagements have allowed for us to direct around \$10,000 into crisis relief efforts in the last year, but vastly more resources are necessary. Whether it is fire relief, debt relief, hospital bills for kayayei or money to rehouse people when kayayei communities are bulldozed, we need to carry money in reserve so as not to have to scramble in times of crisis and chaos just to raise funds. We also want to make giving a more public exercise and be more transparent with where our speaker fees and donations go. By moving the Secondhand Solidarity Fund to DonorBox we can also ensure that donations are more visible to the Kantamanto Community, and we are committed to discussing the status of the fund with key stakeholders on a monthly basis even if there is no immediate crisis. To many of the people we work with, the concept of a "speaking fee" is foreign especially because their voices have never been centered in conversations about sustainability. Much of our work is about helping the Kantamanto community understand the system they are a part of so they can better advocate for themselves. We see this fund as playing a key role in that mission. Importantly though, the Secondhand Solidarity Fund will function separately from the fundraising for our other programs and initiatives as an organization. The purpose of the fund is to simply transfer donations directly into the hands of the people who work six days a week to transport, resell, clean, repair and upcycle clothing.

We hope you will consider supporting this effort. Whether you use our research and images on your respective platforms or in your research. Whether you buy secondhand or sell secondhand through your local consignment shop or online with DePop. Whether you are a secondhand exporter moving millions of items a year, or a clothing brand contributing to the stock of caste-off goods, we hope that you will support this ongoing effort and make it possible for us to respond more quickly should there be another crisis of this magnitude.

**You can make a
donation here: solidarity.theor.org**

Thank you for your support!

