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Haiti After the Quake: Six Months and Counting

Summary

- Six months after the Haiti earthquake, the official statistics remain difficult to fully comprehend. Some 222,750 people were killed, and 300,000 injured. More than 1.3 million were displaced. Total damage was \$7.8 billion. Losses from the quake were historic.
- The international response was comparable. *Operation Unified Response* was the largest U.S. disaster assistance operation in history. Forty-three countries sent emergency personnel, equipment, food and medical supplies. International donors pledged \$5.3 billion for relief and reconstruction.
- Following the end of the emergency phase, progress has slowed to a crawl. Failure to remove massive amounts of rubble and create secure resettlement sites have left more than a million Haitians living in tent and tarp encampments with an active hurricane season predicted.
- The slowdown has resulted from the absence of Haitian government leadership, failure of international donors to make good on their pledges and the scope of the disaster. Recovery has been complicated by the fact that Haiti is entering a 'political season' with national elections scheduled for November 2010.

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Background

On the six month anniversary of the earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, the official statistics on the disaster remain difficult to fully comprehend. According to the Haitian government, 222,750 were killed; 300,000 injured. The presidential palace, parliament, most businesses in the capital and some 300,000 homes were destroyed. More than 1.3 million people were displaced. Total damage from the earthquake was set at \$7.8 billion, or 120 percent of the value of Haiti's gross domestic product.¹ The United Nations headquarters collapsed, causing the death of the chief of mission and 96 staff, the largest loss of U.N. personnel in a single incident.

International response to the disaster was of comparable magnitude. For the United States, *Operation Unified Response* was the largest humanitarian operation following a natural disaster in history. The U.S. military's Southern Command deployed over 20,000 personnel, including a Combat Bridge Team from the 82nd Airborne Division, two battalions from the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, an aircraft carrier, a hospital ship and a flotilla of smaller Naval and U.S. Coast Guard vessels. USAID, the lead U.S. agency for the humanitarian mission, committed over \$654 million in supplies, grants and support. The State Department obligated \$11.2 million to assist refugees and resettle displaced persons. Forty-three countries sent 2,000 search and rescue personnel, plus

medical workers, emergency equipment and supplies. The U.S., Canada and Dominican Republic had the largest contingents, but countries as diverse as Iceland, Israel, Taiwan, Germany and Cuba also sent personnel.

On March 31, the U.N. convened a heavily attended donor's conference in New York that pledged \$5.3 billion over the next two years and a total of \$10 billion overall to finance the Haitian government's "Action Plan for National Recovery and Development of Haiti." The conference approved the creation of two mechanisms to manage implementation of the recovery program: a Joint Interim Haitian Reconstruction Commission co-chaired by U.N. Special Envoy President Bill Clinton and the prime minister of Haiti, and a multi-donor trust fund administered by the World Bank. These institutions were endorsed by Haiti's parliament before the end of its term. As the largely successful emergency response phase of the operation wound down, more than a million displaced Haitians had emergency shelter and access to food, clean water and medical care. It appeared that the planning was in place and the resources were assured for tackling the work of resettlement and recovery that lay ahead.

The Road to Resettlement is Blocked by Rubble

In the months since the U.N. conference, progress in Haiti has slowed to a crawl. The initial 'spring loaded' emergency reaction to the disaster has been replaced by a near stalemate that reflects Haitian realities. The devastation caused by the earthquake has compounded Haiti's chronic vulnerabilities caused by weak and corrupt governance, reliance on international actors to provide basic services, systemic poverty, crime and exposure to hurricanes, heavy rains and flooding. Haiti's government, which faced endemic challenges before the earthquake, suffered the loss of 28 of 29 ministry buildings, the death of 40 percent of the civil service and the destruction of critical records, particularly those related to land ownership. Haiti's president and members of his cabinet continue to operate from a damaged former police station at the airport.

The international community has called upon the Haitian government to provide leadership, but this has not been forthcoming from officials who often seem traumatized by events. In this regard, President Preval's self-effacing leadership style has left the government without a public spokesman, giving rise to complaints from Haitians and internationals that Haiti's government seems absent. In a U.S. television interview on July 13, President Rene Preval said his government was "doing its best" and had used its available resources to launch the recovery phase of the operation. He noted the magnitude of the disaster and the need to coordinate activities of private relief organizations that were operating independently.² Meanwhile, private relief organizations complain about a lack of government direction. There is also the problem of customs officials detaining relief supplies, including earthmoving equipment and emergency vehicles, charging exorbitant storage fees and otherwise abusing their authority.

The Haitian government's failure to translate strategic planning into day to day decisions on dozens of critical issues has created an impasse, particularly in two critical areas: rubble removal and resettlement. Estimates vary, but some 200 million metric tons of rubble cover entire neighborhoods and block roads in Port-au-Prince. An efficient removal operation would require a strategic plan, designated dumping sites, large amounts of heavy equipment and a vast fleet of trucks. All of these are currently lacking, as Haiti's government has not articulated a plan or identified more than one removal location. Efforts to move rubble by heavy equipment and trucks have given away to small scale "food for work" and "clearance for cash" programs run by individual nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Haitians clad in identical tee-shirts use hand tools, pails and wheelbarrows to move rubble short distances, but without impacting the overall problem.

Because ownership of just five percent of Haiti's land was officially recorded before the earthquake, the uncertainty about ownership of property as well as the death or disappearance of owners has created indecision about clearing land or designating dumping sites. The Haitian government and foreign relief agencies are hesitant to take land where records may have been lost or destroyed and ownership is uncertain. In addition, fear that cleared areas would be occupied by squatters has deterred property owners from moving forward. Once people occupy land there is no means to remove them or to settle disputes that might arise.

Failure to clear areas in Port-au-Prince has forced displaced families to crowd into 1,300 tent and tarp encampments scattered from highway meridians to golf courses and the land in front of the presidential palace. Many of these locations are precarious and without adequate sanitation, water or protection against the elements. At least 40 percent of the tents in which people are living already need to be replaced. Many of these settlements are unable to deal with the heavy rains that occur daily and would offer no protection against a hurricane. The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has predicted that eight to 14 hurricanes will strike the Caribbean this season. A direct hit on Haiti could create another major humanitarian disaster.

It is imperative that Haitians living in temporary camps are resettled into appropriate housing, but this effort has made little progress. The goal is to move people into transitional housing, wood and steel-frame buildings capable of withstanding wind and rain. According to the U.N., less than 6,000 structures have been completed and the 120,000 required will not be ready until next year. Meanwhile an effort is underway to repair damaged houses and to encourage some 100,000 people to return to homes that were not affected by the earthquake. Many Haitians have refused to return home because life in the camps, while difficult, does insure access to food, jobs and medical care provided by international agencies. Sadly, for some former slum dwellers, living in the internationally administered camps provides a better quality of life than they had before the earthquake.

Lack of Money and Politics Contribute to the Problem

Following the U.N. conference in March, it appeared that adequate financial resources for resettlement and reconstruction were assured. This has not proven to be the case. Only four countries—Brazil, Norway, Estonia and Australia—have deposited money in the World Bank's donor trust fund, or about two percent of the total pledged. The U.S. pledged \$1.15 billion, but these funds have not been made available by Congress. Other countries have been reluctant or unable to release money. The joint Interim Haitian Reconstruction Commission has met once, but the post of executive director, who will manage day-to-day operations, has not been filled.

Meanwhile, hundreds of private relief agencies, which accepted direct contributions following the quake, have established an uneven record of spending on projects. The American Red Cross, which collected \$468 million, has spent \$148 million and is holding money in reserve as a hedge against future developments. For its part, the Haitian government has sought to attract direct contributions for budget support. In his interview, President Preval seemed to indicate the government was experiencing a shortfall, although the U.N. Development Program reported that \$200 million in contributions have gone directly to the government.³ The general uncertainty surrounding the provision and utilization of financial resources has fed Haitian frustrations leading to public criticism and street protests against the government. Expectations were raised by the publicity associated with the outpouring of international generosity after the earthquake. As current conditions take on a more permanent character, graffiti on the walls of Port-au-Prince calls for the removal of President Preval.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report is based on the work of USIP's Haiti Working Group which has held a series of public forums on Haiti since the January earthquake. It is also based upon numerous discussions with academic experts, journalists, businessmen and Haitian citizens, plus reports published by the U.N., Congress and other sources.

The author, Robert Perito, is the director of the USIP's Haiti Program.

In addition to Preval's handling of Haiti's recovery, critics in Haiti and abroad have also focused on his handling of preparations for national elections scheduled for November 28, 2010. In a Senate report, released on June 10, Senator Richard Lugar criticized the Preval's failure to authorize Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council (PEC) to make arrangements for the elections.⁴ Lugar also questioned the PEC's membership, which was appointed by Preval and has been accused of bias. The PEC has made controversial rulings, barring individuals and opposition political groups from seeking office. In a rare public response, Preval termed Lugar's criticisms "unacceptable" and capable of sowing "anarchy" in Haiti. Even if questions concerning the PEC are resolved, the practical obstacles in the path of holding elections are formidable. For starters, the PEC's headquarters and records were destroyed in the earthquake. Registration, construction of voting centers and campaigning will be particularly difficult in the current environment.

At the same time, a late start on this process will make things more difficult. As the Senate reports points out, the elections are crucial. The ability of the U.S. and the international community to assist Haiti will be severely limited if Haiti's elections fail to result in the selection of a responsible, legitimate and popular government.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From past experiences, the international community has internalized the lesson that it cannot succeed without the Haitian government as a partner. Yet, losses suffered during the earthquake and preoccupation with election politics may prevent the Haitian government from fully playing that role in the near term. The U.N., through its special envoy and chief of mission, may have to provide essential leadership if resettlement and reconstruction are to move forward. Active support from the United States, Haiti's largest donor, will be essential in managing the transition through the hurricane season and elections to installation of a new government next year.

Endnotes

1. Nathaniel Gronewold. "Devastated Haiti Braces for an Active Hurricane Season." *The New York Times*, July 12, 2010.
2. PBS Newshour. "Preval Assesses Haiti's Quake Recovery." July 13, 2010. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/latin_america/july-dec10/haiti_07-13.html
3. Joe Johns and Mary Anne Fox. "Most Countries Fail to Deliver on Haiti Aid Pledges." CNN Cable News Network, July 14, 2010. <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/2010/07/14/most-countries-fail-to-deliver-on-haiti-aid-pledges/>
4. United States Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. "Haiti: No Leadership—No Elections." 111th Congress, 2nd sess. 2010. Washington D.C. June 10, 2010. <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/congress/index.html>



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