



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Haiti May 2012

...[T]he Haitian people will be the chief protagonists of their present and their future.

--Pope Benedict XVI, to the Haitian people on the Anniversary of the Earthquake, 2011

TWO YEARS AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

Before the earthquake of January 12, 2010, Haiti already faced tremendous challenges, both as it struggled to remain stable and to address structural challenges. Yet, it had begun to find reason to hope because recent years had brought a more stable government and tenuous gains in the fight against poverty, although the high cost of living continued to be difficult for the average Haitian.

Haiti has a history of coups and instability as different factions vied for power. When the despotic Duvalier family ruled Haiti, many Haitians sought refuge in the U.S. After the tumultuous on-and-off-again presidency of Jean Bertrand Aristide, the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) came in to help establish a “secure and stable environment.” Its mandate included restructuring and reforming the police; disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating armed groups into civil society; promoting good governance and democratic processes; and protecting human rights. But MINUSTAH’s presence has been controversial. Some point to its failures to provide security and others to alleged abuses perpetrated by some members of the force.

There was hope that President Rene Préal was leading Haiti to be a more stable and developing country. However, the earthquake and President Préal’s handling of the post-earthquake situation revealed severe limitations in leadership. The earthquake itself and the post-earthquake situation also laid bare again Haiti’s structural challenges as well as the problems stemming from the creation of “parallel” systems of social assistance and the lack of coordination between some international agencies.

The images of the earthquake’s devastation spoke clearly and loudly--Haiti was devastated, much of its already fragile infrastructure destroyed, hundreds of thousands people dead or injured, many lost everything, including hope. Haiti urgently needed the international community’s assistance. The mix of an incredibly difficult context (urban, congested, poverty-stricken, and rubble-cluttered), an outdated, inefficient, and sometimes non-existent government system of land tenure, building codes, and building approval requirements, and an earthquake-weakened and barely functioning government all contributed to inaction, fueling desperation. As a result of the final round of Presidential elections held in March, 2011, Michel Martelly became Haiti’s newest President on May 14, 2011. A former entertainer who appealed primarily to the nation’s youth, Haiti’s new President must lead the country as it deals with earthquake recovery, cholera, unemployment, poverty and crime. Martelly’s new government must convince donors that it is safe to invest the billions of dollars they pledged for reconstruction.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

While much of the aid going to Haiti since the earthquake went to immediate humanitarian relief, financing and coordination of financing are also required to restart economic activity, rebuild destroyed housing and infrastructure, and implement longer-term development plans. Haiti needs a sustained commitment of substantial development assistance from the U.S., other donor governments, and international financial institutions if it hopes to address the suffering and alleviate the extreme poverty that deepened in the aftermath of the earthquake. It also needs a long-term development plan that can guide the reconstruction and development process so that the international community, the government of Haiti, and the Haitian people can work in concert to ensure that plans are successful, transparent and participatory.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Before the earthquake, the bishops of Haiti were trying to help Haitian society find its way to peace and reconciliation. After the earthquake, the Church has been one of the leaders in the immediate response and the rebuilding process. Many of the diocesan Caritas agencies throughout the country welcomed and helped resettle the many displaced from Port-Au-Prince. Catholic Relief Services' program in Haiti, one of its largest in the world, has grown even larger, going from about 300 staff to more than double that number. CRS was supporting longer-term development programs and has intensified such programming during the recovery period as it has also expanded the number of regions it serves. To respond to the social and ecclesiastical needs in Haiti, the bishops of Haiti have not only strengthened their Caritas agencies with the help of CRS and many other international agencies, but also set up the *Partnership for the Reconstruction of the Church in Haiti* (PROCHE for its French acronym). PROCHE will coordinate the reconstruction of churches, schools, and other Church properties in Haiti, assuring accountability and transparency.

USCCB POLICY

USCCB has long recognized the suffering of the Haitian people as repeated natural disasters and political turmoil have made that country the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. Assistance and development policies from the international community have not always benefited the Haitian people. USCCB has supported legislation that would provide emergency assistance and foster economic development. After the earthquake, USCCB was very engaged in the successful passage of legislation relieving Haiti's debt, as well as the extension and broadening of the HOPE Acts (now called the Haiti Economic Lift Program, HELP) which give Haitian apparel preferential access to the U.S. market and extend the provisions of the Caribbean Basin Trade Partnership Act. The USCCB has also supported the extension and re-designation of temporary protected status (TPS) to Haitians living illegally in the United States, allowing such individuals who register to remain in this country through January 22, 2013. Recognizing that more still needs to be done to ensure that Haitians can benefit from these policies and renewed economic opportunities, USCCB continues to advocate for a long-term and comprehensive assistance plan that helps Haitians resume normal activities, supports them in taking charge of their future, and helps them fight poverty. USCCB will support legislation similar to the Haiti Empowerment Reconstruction and Assistance (HEAR) Act, recently re-introduced in the U.S. Congress, seeking such a long-term plan. The Conference will also continue to work with the Administration to ensure that funds already appropriated are disbursed in an efficient and timely manner. Remittances (the money sent home by Haitians living primarily in the U.S.) will play a vital part in the long-term economic recovery, which will likely be difficult. For this reason, the USCCB will advocate for an end to deportations of Haitian nationals from the United States, along with supporting necessary extensions of the benefits of TPS classification.

ACTION REQUESTED:

USCCB, CRS, and Migration and Refugee Services ask you to:

- Urge the Obama Administration and the U.S. Congress to re-commit to a sustained and efficient investment in **longer-term recovery and development** aid to Haiti, including efficient and timely use of appropriated funds and the development of a comprehensive plan for the present and the future.
- Urge on-going extensions of TPS to Haiti and a re-designation of eligibility for TPS, so Haitians who arrived after the earthquake may also qualify.

RESOURCES:

For copies of statements, visit: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/haiti.shtml>.

For further information: *Richard Coll*, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3153 (phone); 202-541-3339 (fax); rcoll@usccb.org; or *Robin Contino*; CRS Haiti Earthquake Response Coordinator; 410-951-7357; robin.contino@crs.org.