



BULLETIN

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Humanitarian Disaster in Haiti—A Challenge for the International Community

By Rafał Kownacki

The earthquake that struck Haiti on 12 January was the event that wreaked the most havoc in that country's history. Approximately 200,000 people lost their lives and almost 2 million were made homeless. On the international scene the earthquake revealed that there are no mechanisms in place for joint crisis management in the event of large-scale natural disasters. This should provide the impetus—in particular for the EU member states—to replace ad hoc measures with an efficient aid and humanitarian disaster reaction system.

The earthquake, which had its epicenter near the densely populated Haitian capital Port-au-Prince, caused extraordinary human and material losses. More than half of the city's buildings came down, and all of the hospitals in the capital and the sanitary and sewage systems were destroyed or suffered serious damage. Most of the more than 3 million residents of Ouest department are without electricity or water. In addition to that most of the government and local administrative buildings, police stations and army barracks have been destroyed. In an underdeveloped country without efficient administration and strong non-governmental organizations, in which the authorities do not enjoy public confidence, it proved impossible to introduce effective internal crisis management mechanisms.

Analysis of Measures Undertaken by the International Community. In the first few days following the cataclysm there was very little assistance from abroad. This was due to the confusion caused by the scale of the destruction, exacerbated by the chaos that arose due to the loss of direct fiber optic connectivity with the outside world and lack of reaction from the Haitian authorities. It was not even clear whether President René Préval had survived the cataclysm, as he did not appear in public for four days, until his meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Special attention should be paid to the assistance provided by the U.S. Political and social stability in Haiti is vital for U.S. foreign policy in the Caribbean. The country's development, the success of the fight against poverty and a strong government are in the United States' interest, as it wants to protect itself against the flow of illegal immigrants from Haiti. The Haitian and U.S. governments made an agreement under which the U.S. marines entered areas destroyed in the earthquake to distribute humanitarian aid and provide security and the U.S. troops managed to make the local airport and seaport to some extent operational, and to clear the main road being the main access route to Port-au-Prince. These measures would turn out to be key for the humanitarian effort.

Despite the fact that a 9,000-strong stabilization mission (MINUSTAH) has been stationed in Haiti since 2004, the UN was incapable of immediate reaction. As a result of the earthquake the command center and a large amount of equipment were destroyed. About 100 members of the force lost their lives, including the head of the force, Tunisian Hédi Anabi, his Brazilian deputy, and the Canadian UN Police Commissioner. This was also a reason why it was approximately a week before the surviving members of the contingent were able to start providing the Haitian army with assistance in ensuring security in Port-au-Prince and bring stability to places in which hundreds of thousands of refugees from around the capital were seeking shelter in primitive camps, in tents which they had mostly organized by themselves. The UN force's mandate is to take special measures to ensure that

those most vulnerable to violence (particularly to human trafficking), i.e. women and children, do not suffer due to the current chaos.

The EU countries committed approximately €90 million in aid for Haiti (of which PLN 6 million came from Poland). The European Commission declared it was committing similar funds to help victims of the disaster and to assist with the most urgent reconstruction measures, and also pledged approximately €200 million for long-term reconstruction in Haiti. To help Haiti the Polish authorities dispatched a team of 54 rescuers, which spent a week searching for survivors under the rubble and helping the injured.

The EU's reaction pales in comparison however with the U.S. response. Within a week the United States had efficiently dispersed 11,000 soldiers and had committed a large amount of naval forces and organized airlifts. In response to the UN Security Council's decision on 19 January to strengthen the force in Haiti by an additional 3,500 troops and police, six EU countries declared they were sending 300 police, while Brazil independently decided to send an additional 1,300 troops. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton deserves to be criticized for her decision not to go to Haiti.

System of Humanitarian Aid. In the face of the considerable destruction and the Haitian authorities' loss of effective control over part of the country, the international community had to react. The obligation is provided for in Art. 1.3 of the United Nations Charter, which states that one of the organization's aims is to deal with humanitarian problems through international cooperation. Both the UN Charter itself, in Art. 2.7, and General Assembly Resolution 46/182 of 1991 recommending an integrated approach for the management of natural disasters, emphasize the principle of respect for territorial integrity and the pre-eminence of domestic crisis response facilities. However in cases in which the domestic measures turn out to be insufficient, the international community has the obligation to provide humanitarian aid. International law does not however specify the universal measures to be employed in the event of a natural disaster. The methods undertaken can be specified by regional treaties or bilateral agreements.

A situation of this kind calls into question the effectiveness of the humanitarian aid standards provided for in international law. The activity of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), set up by way of Resolution 46/182, does not successfully achieve the main goal, i.e. coordination of humanitarian assistance, especially with regard to the problem of getting aid to victims of natural disasters. In such a case the success of the action depends on an immediate response and the precision and speed of the measures undertaken.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The earthquake in Haiti demonstrated that there are no effective international rapid response tools for humanitarian crises caused by natural disasters. Since the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004, the international community has not taken the proper measures to strengthen and increase the effectiveness of the currently existing mechanisms. Meanwhile a lot of the deaths caused by the cataclysm could have been avoided if help had arrived sooner. For those suffering due to the earthquake—the injured and people still trapped under the rubble—the first 72 hours are vital.

Governments in developed countries, including Poland, should therefore undertake measures aimed at replacing the *ad hoc* response by constructing a permanent international system characterized by independent financial reserves, a high level of operational capacity of logistical and military units, a multi-scenario instruction and procedure system, and finally an independent follow-up audit and transparent rules of responsibility. The conference scheduled for March to be held at the UN headquarters for donor countries for Haiti will be a good opportunity to propose creating such a system. Apart from specifying the medium and long-term plans for international aid and involvement in reconstruction in Haiti, the UN should devise universal tools. As part of this aid it seems advisable to create a fully operational rapid reaction force which would respond immediately to events of this kind. The Security Council could make an emergency decision to set these measures into motion at the request and with the consent of the government of the affected country, or the Humanitarian Aid Coordinator, should communication with the government prove "impossible."