

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

---

Volume 10  
Issue 3 February Roundtable: An Annotation of  
"Tragedy and Opportunity for Haiti" by Kara C.  
Mc Donald

---

Article 4

2-1-2010

## Hope for Haiti?

Kurt Mills  
*University of Glasgow*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the Emergency and Disaster Management Commons, Human Rights Law Commons, International Humanitarian Law Commons, International Law Commons, International Relations Commons, and the Other International and Area Studies Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Mills, Kurt (2010) "Hope for Haiti?," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 10: Iss. 3, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol10/iss3/4>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

---

## Hope for Haiti?

### Abstract

Kara McDonald raises the question of whether or not the international community will go beyond its patchwork response to Haiti's problems. One wonders why the question is even asked, given the international community's track record in Haiti, as well as in other parts of the world. Indeed, setting aside the many positive acts of individuals and states to address the suffering after the earthquake, the response to Haiti illustrates the inability of the international community to respond in a coherent and humane manner to many crises around the world.

### Keywords

Human rights, Haiti, Humanitarian aid, Natural disasters, Development, Charity, Systemic change

### Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

### Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

## Hope for Haiti?

by Kurt Mills

Kara McDonald raises the question of whether or not the international community will go beyond its patchwork response to Haiti's problems. One wonders why the question is even asked, given the international community's track record in Haiti, as well as in other parts of the world. Indeed, setting aside the many positive acts of individuals and states to address the suffering after the earthquake, the response to Haiti illustrates the inability of the international community to respond in a coherent and humane manner to many crises around the world.

Let us consider the primary response we have seen in Haiti: saturation media coverage— *de rigueur* for such a catastrophe. And this coverage extends beyond TV, newspapers, and the Web. As with Ethiopia in 1984, we have a major popular figure gathering together lots of pop icons to record a song to raise money for the poor people of Haiti. And who is this major humanitarian, lending his public image (or, perhaps more precisely, enhancing his public image) to the cause? None other than the king of global karaoke, the master of the pop star-hopeful put-down—Simon Cowell. While the media coverage has raised gobs of money from people in rich countries to help people in Haiti, these apparent acts of altruism raise many other questions. For example, why exactly do we need a mean-spirited media kingmaker to be the one to appeal to our better angels (or, indeed, the likes of Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan, who flooded the twitter verse with their impassioned pleas to help Haiti)? Is this not just an example of famous people using tragedy to become more famous?

Of course, one should not underestimate the outpouring of sympathy and resources for Haiti. But does Haiti not exemplify the persistent global inequalities that have left it in such poor condition for so long? One needs more than money to address the situation. Consider the response of the US in sending in its military as it has a number of times before, to both undermine (more often) and support democracy (once). While one assumes that most of the soldiers sent into Haiti see their mission as a positive operation—and it is difficult to envision what other country might have responded so quickly—the military has also come under significant criticism for putting its own security above the needs of the Haitian people. If many nongovernmental organizations were able to operate in the perceived insecure environment in post-earthquake Haiti, why couldn't the US military be more proactive from the very beginning in getting aid out rather than securing its own perimeters first? It is not invading a hostile nation.

Perhaps the most egregious element of the response by the [US is the reaffirmation of the inviolability of its borders](#). The US fears a mass exodus in the weeks to come. It wants to avoid hordes of poor Haitians climbing onto boats and trying to get to the US, and has put in place plans to intercept Haitians and take them to Guantánamo Bay, a place synonymous with torture and the most demeaning of treatment against humans. How could anybody in this supposedly enlightened Obama administration think this is a good idea? Is this not just a repetition of previous actions? The Clinton administration had Haitians intercepted at sea and either forcibly repatriated or distributed to various places around the Caribbean, including Guantánamo Bay. Basically, when the US fears poor people are getting too close to its shores, it deploys the military to prevent this intrusion. In 1994, Clinton sent in the military after tens of thousands of Haitians were interdicted. This time, the military has been sent in before the feared waves of

refugees can even leave Haiti. The US has also denied visas to many people with serious injuries seeking treatment in the US, apparently concerned that...I don't know. I really can't fathom it. Maybe the US government thinks that these people, who not only have lost everything—family, friends, and home—but are also physically incapacitated, could pose a threat to the national security of the country. It sounds bizarre, but given that the US continues to be scared of a little country 90 miles off its shores, I suppose any delusion is possible. It hardly seems humanitarian, however, which certainly calls into question the motives of the US military operation in the first place.

Global inequalities are evident in the case of [International SOS](#). This is a private company which helps rich people from corporations, governments, and other organizations in times of crisis. While aid organizations were trying to organize transportation to get relief to those most affected by the earthquake, International SOS came in, snatched up hard-to-get airplane tickets, hired helicopters and cars, and swooped in with satellite phones and guns to evacuate a few people. One wonders how many people died as a result of national and international organizations not being able to get to the affected in time because the transportation had already been bought by this company. One does not want to dismiss the situation of these wealthy internationals caught in the earthquake, but this highlights the persistence of global disparities, which are not going to go away after a few hundred million dollars are sent to Haiti and the world subsequently turns its attention elsewhere.

Why has so much money been donated to the relief effort in Haiti? And why do we feel the need to get something (i.e. music) in return for our donation? Certainly anybody who bought the Hope for Haiti album was already familiar with the suffering there. Perhaps Simon Cowell and the organizers of Hope for Haiti have something to do with it, but would so many have donated if the situation wasn't so depoliticized? It's certainly easier to give money to a situation which does not seem political. Politics did not cause the earthquake, but politics (both local and global) might have been responsible for the lack of infrastructure which exacerbated the situation and made the humanitarian response that much more difficult. But, we don't think about that. If humanitarian crises are placed within their proper political context, it becomes easier to dismiss the situation: “Oh, those poor Rwandans or Darfuris. It's terrible, really, but it's all tribal. Why encourage them with money?” If there are no politics involved, if the suffering seems in some way “pure,” then we can give money. Further, if the suffering is dramatic and photogenic, so much the better. That photo of a girl trapped in the rubble that every single news outlet was running the day after the earthquake must have been a godsend to the aid agencies, as were the mounting numbers.

Again, I am certainly not dismissing the many of tens of thousands of people who have been killed and the millions made homeless by the earthquake. But why have we not seen the same response to war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)? In the last 15 years, this conflict (or rather series of conflicts), facilitated by the lack of robust response to the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath, has resulted in perhaps somewhere between three and six million deaths. Tens or hundreds of thousands of people have died each year from the fighting and the resulting disease and malnourishment, despite the presence of a large peacekeeping mission. Yet, where is Simon Cowell? Even Darfur has spawned its own global social movement, merging religious fervor (it was the fundamentalists, after all, who first got Sudan on the US radar screen) and

international norm entrepreneurs who latched on to Darfur as an issue of international responsibility to protect. But the DRC does not have its own global social movement, and it does not have saturation media coverage, and it does not have the king of karaoke, and, perhaps most importantly of all, the humanitarian crisis is wrapped in political turmoil. What exactly does it take to create sustained interest in the DRC? It would seem to have everything against it. We don't see starving Congolese children on TV every day. Beyond the occasional appearance of Angelina Jolie and George Clooney, it doesn't have a vast array of media stars. And, most importantly, it has a political context in which the major global powers are seriously implicated (although, on the rare occasions that people do think about the DRC, they are more likely to imagine tribalism than the complete and utter failure of their governments to live up to their international responsibilities).

Kara McDonald holds out hope that this time, things will be different in Haiti. We have already seen that they are not. Indeed, we have seen more of the same. In the end, the world is going to leave Haiti in the gutter, just as it has the DRC, Somalia, and many other places. After all, once the aid agencies leave and the earthquake disappears from the front pages, all we will be left with is the political context of rebuilding Haiti within a global system of inequalities. That does not bode well for long-term international support for Haiti. Perhaps I am being unfair; the international response has undoubtedly saved many lives, and the many people who have donated money have not done so for bad reasons. But the political theater, media frenzy, and hypocrisy being repeated, yet again, in another humanitarian crisis, in yet another poor country of little real interest to the powers that be, do not foreshadow true, sustained, effective humanitarian and political action in Haiti or elsewhere.

---

*Kurt Mills is a Senior Lecturer in International Human Rights at the University of Glasgow. He previously taught at The American University in Cairo, Mt. Holyoke College, James Madison University, and Gettysburg College, and served as the Assistant Director of the Five College Program in Peace and World Security Studies at Hampshire College. Publications include Human Rights in the Emerging Global Order: A New Sovereignty?, and numerous articles on human rights and humanitarian issues in, among other journals, *Civil Wars*, *Global Governance*, *Global Responsibility to Protect*, *Global Society*, *Journal of Human Rights*, *International Politics*, *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, and *Peace Review*. He is currently working on a book examining international responses to mass atrocities in Africa. He is the founder of the Human Rights Section of the International Studies Association, and founder and co-editor of the H-Human-Rights listserv. His web page is: <http://web.mac.com/vicfalls/>*