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Can They Stay the Distance? The International Response to the Earthquake in Haiti

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Can They Stay the Distance? The International Response to the Earthquake in Haiti

Abstract

Haiti is devastated again. Over one hundred thousand people are presumed dead. Reports of looting and violence are emerging. The international community is responding, with a statement from the Secretary-General of the UN, a resolution by the Security Council, a Special Session, and resolution from the UN Human Rights Council and numerous aid and UN agencies in the country seeking to help as many survivors as possible. Various commentators, including Kara McDonald, have claimed this is an opportunity for a stronger Haiti. Whether this opportunity is realized or not depends in large part on the international community, and whether it can stay the distance.

Keywords

Human rights, Haiti, Humanitarian aid, Natural disasters, Development

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Can They Stay the Distance? The International Response to the Earthquake in Haiti

by Anna Talbot

Haiti is devastated again. Over one hundred thousand people are presumed dead. Reports of looting and violence are emerging. The international community is responding, with a statement from the Secretary-General of the UN, a resolution by the Security Council, a Special Session, and resolution from the UN Human Rights Council and numerous aid and UN agencies in the country seeking to help as many survivors as possible. Various commentators, including Kara McDonald, have claimed this is an opportunity for a stronger Haiti. Whether this opportunity is realized or not depends in large part on the international community, and whether it can stay the distance.

History of Trauma

This is not the first time Haiti has faced disaster and instability. Recovery from the series of hurricanes that devastated the country in 2008 had still not been completed when the earthquake hit. Political instability has also taken its toll. Challenges persist at almost every turn: the judiciary is severely under-resourced; the police force is still weakened by corruption. Even before the earthquake, infrastructure was insufficient to service the needs of the population. Now it barely exists.

The confusion and unrest that currently reign within Haiti mean that, in addition to the massive humanitarian crisis that is unfolding, there is a real risk that human rights abuses will increase. This risk has already been identified by UN bodies such as the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), for example, which [noted](#) that sexual violence can become acute in the wake of a national disaster such as this one.

In a [statement](#) to the Ministerial Meeting on Haiti in Montreal on January 25, Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of Mission for the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), Edmond Mulet, noted that Haiti had been on the path to stabilization before the earthquake. Elections were being prepared for, economic reforms were under way, and progress was being seen in reductions in violence. The tragedy of this disaster, then, could well go beyond the unimaginable loss of life and human suffering, if care is not taken to preserve and build on this progress in the rebuilding efforts. Ensuring that human rights considerations are involved in the recovery will be fundamental to avoiding this kind of backsliding.

Faced alongside a supportive international community, these challenges can be met. With careful planning, rebuilding efforts can present an opportunity to assist Haiti in tackling both political and humanitarian challenges in a way that ensures respect for the human rights of all.

International Response

The UN response to this earthquake has been swift. Statements have been made, money has been released, and the Human Rights Council convened a Special Session, all in pursuit of protecting human rights after this tragedy.

The day after the earthquake, on January 13, the Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki Moon, gave a [briefing](#) to the General Assembly. In his remarks, he dispatched Edmond Mulet to Haiti that day. He also ordered that US\$10 million be released from the Central Emergency Response Fund to “kick-start” the UN response. This was supported by a Security Council [resolution](#) on January 18, expanding the MINUSTAH force levels to support the recovery, reconstruction, and stability efforts.

The human rights community is also engaging in the response, seeking to ensure a human rights perspective is incorporated into recovery efforts. Early signs are positive. On January 27, the Human Rights Council held a [Special Session](#) entitled, “The support of the Human Rights Council to the Recovery Process in Haiti after the Earthquake of January 12, 2010: a Human Rights Approach.” The resulting [draft resolution](#) underlined the importance of protecting children and emphasized the need to apply a gender-based approach to the recovery process. In addition to the CEDAW statement referred to above, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also released a [statement](#) encouraging relief workers to pay attention to the needs of vulnerable children. By encouraging a human rights-based approach to the recovery effort, these international bodies are seeking to ensure that the very high risks faced by women and children (such as trafficking or sexual assault) are minimized. By being aware of these risks, and taking steps to ensure their prevention, agencies can prevent further tragedies from occurring.

Certainly, Haiti is in a lot of trouble. Repeated natural disasters, combined with serious ongoing challenges to government and human rights, mean that this trouble is likely to continue for some time. The international community is rallying, however, and a significant amount of assistance is getting through and saving lives. By incorporating human rights considerations into the response, further trauma can be minimized. As Mulet noted, it is now up to the international community to follow through. Slow progress must not be seen as failure, but rather accepted with patience and perseverance. By staying after the news cameras leave, the international community can make progress on many of the humanitarian and human rights problems that exist in Haiti.

**The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of Amnesty International*

Anna Talbot has worked in the legal department of Amnesty International since January 2008. Before that she graduated with honors in Law and History from the Australian National University and qualified as a barrister and solicitor of the Supreme Court of Victoria (Australia) in 2007. She has also completed the Advance Course on the International Protection of Human Rights through the Institute for Human Rights at Åbo Akademi University in 2009.