

# **International Responses to the Earthquake in Haiti**

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The earthquake in Haiti is a terrible tragedy that has resulted in thousands of deaths, widespread destruction and a terrible setback to progress in Haiti. Several factors contributed to this earthquake being particularly devastating. First, Haiti is not a place like, for example California, where earthquakes occur with great frequency, so the buildings and other structures were not built with seismic issues taken into consideration. Second, seismic precautions are not cheap; and Haiti, of course, is an extremely poor country, so even if it had been a concern, it is unlikely buildings able to sustain an earthquake of this magnitude would have been built.

The contrast between the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in Northern California, known for amongst other things disrupting the World Series that year, and the events in Haiti demonstrate this. The Loma Prieta earthquake which occurred in a wealthy country in a region prone to, and therefore prepared for, earthquakes led to less than a hundred deaths. While the number of fatalities in Haiti is not yet known, there will be at least a few hundred times that many deaths in Haiti. Lastly, because Haiti is a small country located in an island, it has only one airport and shares a border with only one country. Thus, while Haiti is very close to the U.S., it is still logistically difficult to move supplies and relief workers there quickly and efficiently.

Although it is clear that the cost of the earthquake in lives, infrastructure and economic growth for Haiti will be devastating, the response to the disaster in Haiti by governments, multi-lateral bodies, private charities and individuals has been heartening. Countries from all over the world, and multi-lateral organizations, have offered valuable assistance. Private contributions, notably from the U.S. have also been substantial.

International assistance following a natural disaster of this sort is not new. Many of the same actors provided support to the victims of the Tsunami in 2004. It may, however, become more common in the next decades. Unusual weather events will likely be one of the first impacts of climate change which will be felt. Although the event in Haiti was an earthquake with no likely connection to climate change, the general pattern of a devastating natural disaster occurring in a country that has already had more than its share of misfortune which will both cause immediate tragedy and perhaps set that country's development back years may become more common.

It seems that this could lead to several outcomes, but two are perhaps the most likely. The first is that as time goes by and these events become, tragically, more common, the wealthy countries, and international organizations will become more expert at providing assistance and coordinating their efforts. This would be a great development which would lead not only to more effectively helping the victims of these tragedies, but also to better communication and cooperation between powerful and wealthy countries.

The second scenario is that disaster fatigue, or something like it, begins to occur among the governments and populations of wealthy countries. Mobilizing to help Haiti after this earthquake is the decent, right and human thing to do. Millions of ordinary citizens have reached into their pockets to try to help the people of Haiti, but if these catastrophes begin to occur more frequently, this compassion may become in shorter supply. People may, instead of seeing assistance of this kind as simple human compassion, see it as some form of international welfare. In this case, the hateful and bizarre rantings of people like Rush Limbaugh and Pat Robertson, which have met with criticism almost across the political spectrum, may not be so unwelcome in a few years. If the second scenario occurs, not only will it reflect a triumph of insensitivity over decency, but it will make the first years of climate change even more disruptive and costly.