

Extent of Haitian devastation can be blamed on corruption

By John Rossomando 02/01/10



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The human calamity that has followed in the wake of the 7.0-magnitude Haitian earthquake that hit on Jan. 12 has filled TV screens around the world for several weeks now and has triggered an outpouring of money and support from around the world.

But little of the press coverage has focused on the underlying ugly truths behind the massive loss of life, now estimated at around 150,000 dead, and Haiti's continuing extreme poverty—namely the island nation's extreme corruption.

Many analysts believe Haiti's lack of enforced building codes stands at the epicenter of the massive loss of life because countless lives would have been spared had the nation had modern building codes. By comparison, the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, which had a similar magnitude, only resulted in the loss of 63 lives.

Cato Institute scholar Ian Vasquez says the island nation's extreme poverty makes having modern codes cost prohibitive.

But Dr. Pedro De Alba, an engineering professor at the University of New Hampshire, says techniques exist to build lower-cost earthquake resistant buildings and had they been the norm prior to the earthquake thousands of Haitians would still be alive today.

According to the Miami Herald, Haiti has made efforts to beef up its building code in the past. But De Alba says the devastation that unfolded during the earthquake suggests to him that corruption in the area of codes enforcement and construction possibly played a role in the tragedy.

According to the Berlin, Germany-based group Transparency International, Haiti ranks as one of the world's most corrupt nations.

The group's Corruption Perception Index, published in Nov. 2006, highlighted the connection between Haiti's poverty and extreme levels of corruption when it ranked the island nation 177 out of the 180 nations it surveyed. The index ranks nations from least corrupt to most corrupt with the latter ranking at the bottom of the scale.

Only Iraq, Burma and Somalia ranked lower on the scale of the world's most corrupt nations. It also consistently ranks as the most corrupt nation in the Western hemisphere.

At the time of the report, Transparency International's president, Huguette Labelle, said corruption stands as the chief cause of poverty in Haiti and in other poor nations with similar problems.

"When institutions are weak, corruption grows and gets out of control with terrible consequences for society as a whole including widespread injustice and inequality," Labelle said in the 2006 report.

Haiti also ranked 14th worldwide in Foreign Policy magazine's 2008 index of failed states due to the prevalence of corruption in all levels of government and society.

Since 1960, the international community has contributed approximately \$9 billion in aid to Haiti without any significant positive results largely due to corruption, says Heritage Foundation Haiti expert Jim Roberts.

The United States contributed \$378 million last year alone before the earthquake. And the Obama administration has committed a further \$169 million toward the United Nation's \$507 million Haiti appeal since the natural disaster.

In 2003, Haitians received \$24.70 per capita in aid for its 9 million population, which roughly equals twice the aid received by the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole.

The Spanish group **FRIDE** says Haiti's political and economic elites have obstructed efforts to make Haitian society and government more transparent and have done everything they can to obstruct efforts to establish the rule of law and end the corruption. This has led to the squandering of millions in aid.

"Corruption is a destabilizing force, and it is difficult to gauge the extent of its effects," **Nancy Roc**, a freelance journalist wrote, in the March 2009 edition of FRIDE's journal "Comment." "In Haiti today, political will has been undermined ... and Haitian society has lost trust in its state institutions."

Over the past several years, Haiti has been wracked by successive corruption scandals involving the diversion of public funds for private gain by individuals close to those in power.

This tendency has frequently made it difficult for the private agencies that provide more than four-fifths of the country's public services. These agencies have been forced to deal with a series of weak, corrupt governments with thousands of "phantom" employees in its civil service who collected paychecks, but never showed up for work.

"These are cultural and political fundamental issues the Haitians are going to have to address going forward," Roberts said. "To go forward I don't think it is fair to the U.S. taxpayers to allow the continuation of business as usual like before the earthquake by the Haitian government."

The Haitian government has largely failed to maintain the infrastructure the U.S. and international community has built up in the country due to corruption and its overall ineffectiveness, Roberts says.

According to the Heritage Foundation, Haiti's hostile climate toward entrepreneurship and private property rights acts as an additional obstacle that keeps much of its population in poverty because it deprives ordinary Haitians of the fruits of their labors. At the same time, Haiti's laws and social norms serve to keep its wealthy elite caste empowered at the expense of ordinary Haitians who are prevented from being upwardly mobile.

"If people don't have faith they can be able to keep the fruits of their labors and buy a piece of property and have it protected from some politically powerful, well-connected person or group to come along and expropriate it through government power, they aren't going to have much incentive to work hard," Roberts said. "We feel the environmental degradation in Haiti is closely tied to the lack of protection of property rights as an institution. Addressing this needs to be part of the recovery package."

Haiti needs to look to the Dominican Republic, which it shares the same island with for answers on how to improve its situation because its neighbor has been far more effective and prosperous, Roberts says.

Setting Haiti on the road to prosperity cannot happen unless the nation strengthens its judiciary and security forces to establish the rule of law free from corruption, which it has so far resisted. A strong ethical Haitian judiciary and security force could reduce corruption and Haiti's notorious violent crime epidemic, which perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

Haiti must be forced to improve social conditions for its impoverished populace, so the millions of dollars of foreign aid will not be wasted by Haiti's elites in the wake of the earthquake and its people can become prosperous rather than impoverished.

John Rossomando is an experienced journalist whose work has been featured in numerous publications such as CNSNews.com, Newsmax and Crisis Magazine. He also served as senior managing editor of The Bulletin, a 100,000-circulation daily newspaper in Philadelphia and received the Pennsylvania Associated Press Managing Editors first-place award in 2008 for his reporting.