



## Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

### **Background on Haiti** **February 2010**

*I appeal to the generosity of all people so that these our brothers and sisters who are experiencing a moment of need and suffering may not lack our concrete solidarity and the effective support of the international community. The Catholic Church will not fail to move immediately, through her charitable institutions, to meet the most immediate needs of the population.*

*Pope Benedict XVI, Papal Appeal Following Earthquake in Haiti, January 13, 2010*

#### **THE GENERAL SITUATION**

Haiti has a reputation of being a nation in crisis, a failed state struggling against forces of violence and political turmoil, a people barely surviving. Before the earthquake of January 12, 2010 Haiti faced tremendous challenges, but it had begun to find reason to hope because recent years had brought a more stable government and tenuous gains in the fight against poverty, although the high cost of living continued to be difficult for the average Haitian. There were steady signs that Haiti was recovering from years of corrupt government and international boycotts which caused businesses to flee. The Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement (HOPE I) Act, passed by Congress in 2006 with USCCB support, had begun to yield modest results by creating over 5,000 jobs in the apparel industry in Haiti. HOPE I was amended in 2008 to create HOPE II which extended trade preferences for 10 years, expanded duty-free treatment to more apparel products, and simplified the rules for using the program.

Haiti has a history of coups and instability as different factions have vied for power. When the despotic Duvalier family ruled Haiti, many Haitians sought refuge in the U.S. In 1990, Jean Bertrand Aristide became president after Haiti's first free election, but his rule deeply divided Haiti and he fled to the U.S. following a 1991 coup. Many Haitians took to boats in 1994 seeking safe haven in the U.S. The U.S. military removed the military junta in power and restored President Aristide. After much struggle, armed conflict between political opponents broke out in 2004 and the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) came in to help establish a "secure and stable environment." Its mandate included restructuring and reforming the police; disarming, demobilizing and reintegrating armed groups into civil society; promote good governance and democratic processes, and protect human rights. With MINUSTAH in its third five-year authorization, the security situation in Haiti appeared to be improving and an effective national police force was being developed.

President Rene Préval was successful in getting support from the White House, Congress, International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and Organization of American States to address the needs of Haiti. President Préval also called on governments, especially those of France, Canada and the U.S., to step up long-term development aid.

And then a massive earthquake hit. The images of the devastation spoke clearly and loudly--Haiti was torn apart in chaos and utter desperation. Haiti urgently needed the international community's assistance. President Barack Obama, speaking to the Haitian people, noted: "Few in the world have endured the hardships that you have known. Long before this tragedy, daily life itself was often a bitter struggle. And after suffering so much for so long, to face this new horror must cause some to look up and ask, have we somehow been forsaken?" But he also offered hope: "...[Y]ou will not be forsaken; you will not be forgotten. ... So today, you must know that help is arriving -- much, much more help is on the way." (January 14, 2010)

## THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

While much of the aid going to Haiti since the earthquake has been for immediate humanitarian relief, financing must also be found to restart economic activity, rebuild destroyed housing and infrastructure, and carry out longer-term development. Haiti needs a sustained commitment of generous development assistance from the U.S., other donor governments, and international financial institutions if it hopes to be able to move toward eliminating the extreme poverty that deepened in the aftermath of the earthquake. The United States has already forgiven all the debt Haiti owes it, and the U.S. now only gives assistance in the form of grants. However, some creditors, mainly the IMF, IDB and Venezuela, still hold about 1 billion in loans. The U.S. needs to work with these creditors to forgive Haiti's debt and ensure that any new loans are given in the form of grants so that money that would have gone to repayments can instead go to reconstruction and investments in development.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Before the earthquake, bishops in Haiti were helping Haitian society find its way to peace and reconciliation. Catholic Relief Services' program in Haiti, one of its largest in the world, was engaged in responding to the bishops' call to help develop the Church's role in promoting lasting peace and true reconciliation. CRS and other major non-governmental organizations were also playing their traditional role of providing critically needed supplies of food and medicines throughout the country. CRS was supporting longer-term development programs. But the earthquake left an estimated 200,000 people dead, including Archbishop Serge Miot of Port-au-Prince, and hundreds of thousands of people injured or without shelter. For a country already in extreme poverty, the earthquake brought economic devastation and complicated recovery efforts. The Church in Haiti responded to the disaster by providing emergency relief, thanks to the support of many Catholic agencies from around the world. Catholic Relief Services is taking a leading role in this effort. USCCB called for a special National Collection.

## USCCB POLICY

USCCB has long recognized the fragility and suffering of the Haitian people as repeated natural disasters and political turmoil have made that country the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. Consequently, the bishops have supported legislation that would provide emergency assistance and foster economic development. In 2006 and 2008, USCCB was very engaged in the successful passage of the HOPE Acts referred to above which gave Haitian apparel preferential access to the U.S. market. In the wake of the earthquake and looking towards the resumption of normal activity, more still needs to be done to ensure that Haitians can benefit from these new economic opportunities. Therefore, USCCB will support improvements to HOPE that would allow local Haitians to grow their businesses, create better paying jobs and work towards better labor standards in that fragile economy. Since remittances (the money sent home) by Haitians living primarily in the U.S. will play a vital part in economic recovery, USCCB welcomed President Obama's granting Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to eligible Haitians in the U.S., allowing them to remain and work in the U.S. for 18 months. Since recovery is expected to be long and difficult, USCCB will advocate for an extension of the TPS as necessary.

## ACTION REQUESTED:

- A. Support U.S. government provision of **immediate relief for Haiti** (including allowing early tax deductions for donations to Haiti relief efforts) and the granting of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for 18 months to Haitians in the U.S.;
- B. Urge sustained and substantial investment in **longer-term recovery and development**, including:
  1. sustaining U.S. international assistance to Haiti and encouraging the donor community to also do so;
  2. broadening trade preferences (e.g. HOPE II; polo shirts instead of just t-shirts, etc);
  3. ensuring total debt relief by urging multilateral institutions (IMF and IDB) and other nations to forgive Haiti's debt so that they can invest in recovery and development; and
  4. extending TPS for Haitians in the U.S. for additional periods as necessary.

## RESOURCES:

For copies of statements, visit: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/haiti.shtml>.

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