

# WebMemo



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## American Leadership Necessary to Assist Haiti After Devastating Earthquake

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America's response thus far to the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti on January 12 has been far too mute, creating an unexpected vacuum of leadership in a critical region. Haiti is the most impoverished nation of the Americas. The government under President René Prével is weak and literally now in shambles. Cuba and Venezuela, already intent on minimizing U.S. influence in the region, are likely to seize this opportunity to raise their profile and influence in a country that is already battling drugs and corruption.

It is clearly in U.S. interests to prevent this tragedy from becoming even worse and ensure that Haiti returns from this crisis as an even stronger democracy. President Obama should initiate a rapid response that is not only bold but decisive, mobilizing U.S. military, governmental, and civilian capabilities for both a short-term rescue and relief effort and a longer-term recovery and reform program in Haiti.

**Decisive U.S. Response Needed.** The earthquake has both humanitarian and U.S. national security implications. Loss of life is expected to be heavy. Much of Haiti's infrastructure—largely built by the United States over the past century—lies in ruins. Public order is severely threatened. Rescue teams and first responders from the U.S. and around the world stand ready to move as soon as airports and ports can be opened. The United Nations Mission in Haiti is still in shock from losses it has sustained, and any U.N. response in the

immediate future will likely not be large enough to handle the scale of this emergency.

This tragic occurrence in the most impoverished nation of the Americas should trigger a bold, integrated, and compassionate response from the White House. President Obama needs to demonstrate leadership and put the U.S. in the forefront of assistance and relief operations. Fortunately, he can turn to the United States Southern Command (Southcom), stationed in Miami, which has increasingly prepared for this type of emergency.

President Obama should be prepared to send:

- Sufficient U.S. military and civilian forces to help Haitians restore and maintain order not only in the capital of Port-au-Prince but the surrounding areas,
- Heavy equipment to clear the debris and rubble, and
- Emergency food supplies and medicines.

President Obama must also anticipate maintaining a robust U.S. effort while Haiti is rebuilt—not just during the initial burst of international aid. The Obama Administration should also work closely with the global community that is mobilizing its responses as well.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm2754.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm2754.cfm)

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**Looking to a Long-Term Recovery.** Over the longer term, there is much the U.S. can do to help Haiti recover. The U.S. must insist that the Haitian government prevent corruption from infecting the humanitarian assistance flowing to the country and rebuild the institutions of governance. While on the ground in Haiti, the U.S. military can interrupt the nightly flights of cocaine to Haiti and the Dominican Republic that come from Venezuela. U.S. Coast Guard assets should move to block efforts to smuggle displaced Haitians into the U.S.

Congress should immediately expand U.S. trade preferences for Haiti. The 2006 Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement Act, and an extension approved in 2008, helped to create jobs and boost apparel exports and investment by providing tariff-free access to the U.S. market. The apparel sector represents about two-thirds of Haitian exports and nearly one-tenth of Haiti's GDP.

The U.S. should also establish trade preferences for other manufactures and agriculture commodity exports from Haiti to the U.S. Benefits for both Haitian and American importers and exporters are available under the Caribbean Basin Trade Partnership Act—which provides for duty-free export of many Haitian products assembled from U.S. components or materials—the successor program to the Caribbean Basin Initiative.

Additionally, the large Haitian-born *diaspora* population in the United States will no doubt be an important factor in Haiti's recovery, both through increased remittances back home and perhaps by the decisions of some Haitian-Americans to move back to Haiti to help rebuild. Their goodwill needs to be mobilized.

Finally, a vital part of Haiti's recovery will be increased help from the faith-based community in the U.S. and around the world. Religious organizations have long played a critical role in keeping Haiti afloat through generous cash and food donations as well as mission visits to help build and run Haitian schools and clinics. Faith-based assistance often has more lasting long-term effects than official development assistance, and no doubt this will prove to be the case in Haiti.

**Under Scrutiny: What America Must Do.** The U.S. response will be closely scrutinized by its neighbors in the Americas. Cuban medical personnel and Venezuelan cash and assistance teams will arrive in Haiti, and there is certainly bound to be tension and jockeying for credit and media attention. In this tragedy, one would hope a sense of common humanity prevails. But the Castros and Chávezes of this world do not play that way. The propagandists in Havana and Caracas will attempt to exploit the situation and make envious comparisons about the U.S. response. Friendlier nations like Brazil, France, and Canada have heavily invested in peacekeeping operations and will need to be part of the coalition to reconstruct Haiti. The United States can work with these countries bilaterally and through the United Nations to strengthen coordination and cooperation.

The U.S. should therefore do the following:

- President Obama should tap high-level, bipartisan leadership. Clearly former President Clinton, the U.N. special envoy to Haiti, is a logical choice and is already coordinating the international responses with the U.N. President Obama should also reach out to a senior Republican figure, perhaps former President George W. Bush, to lead the bipartisan effort for the Republicans.
- Congress should begin work on a package of assistance, trade, and reconstruction efforts needed to put Haiti on its feet and open the way for deep and lasting democratic reforms.
- The U.S. also needs a strong and vigorous public diplomacy effort to counter negative propaganda emanating from the Castro–Chávez camp and demonstrate that U.S. leadership and involvement in the Caribbean remains a powerful force for good.

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