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Will quake cause outside world to rally behind Haiti?

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AFP Photo/Juan Barreto

OTTAWA -- Fast-forward five or 10 years and imagine Haiti boasting a stable, effective government and a contented, gainfully employed population living amid gleaming new earthquake-resistant hospitals, hotels and homes.

The picture would require a vivid imagination in the best of times and likely is impossible to conjure up in the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake that delivered another devastating blow to the tiny nation, which has been torn asunder for decades by political and social unrest and grinding poverty.

But could there be a silver lining in the nightmare that has befallen the Caribbean nation of nine million people? Will Haitians and the outside world finally rally behind what some experts say is a long overdue commitment of sustained financial, moral and practical support and end Haiti's status as the Western Hemisphere's biggest basket case?

Jean Slick, a former aid worker with the Canadian Red Cross, is among those clinging to hope a better Haiti will emerge from the deadly rubble.

Ms. Slick traces her stubborn optimism to the two years she spent on a Red Cross team overseeing the rebuilding of homes in the Indonesian province of Aceh after a tsunami on Boxing Day, 2004, swamped 13 countries in the region, killing almost 230,000 people.

"One of the things that I personally came away from the tsunami with is believing in the impossible," Ms. Slick said in a telephone interview. "I witnessed and saw devastation there that was unimaginable. I tell people to take their hand and wipe it across a community and leave nothing, and that's what we saw."

Five years and \$6.7-billion later, the evidence suggests that while Aceh is not problem-free, it is making political and economic strides and that its buildings are sturdier and safer places for people to live and work.

Ms. Slick, who now heads the masters program for disaster and emergency management at Royal Roads University in Victoria, says she's convinced the international community has learned enough from past natural disasters to ensure Haiti and its residents emerge from the earthquake on a better path.

Development experts say the formula entails re-establishing as quickly as possible the lives and livelihoods of Haitians, and developing a credible, thoughtful, targeted and well co-ordinated long-term recovery plan.

Ms. Slick and others question, however, whether there is the political will within the international community to go beyond the daunting life-saving phase of the challenge to commit to the long-term investments in everything from security to education and health that are needed to turn around Haiti's fortunes once and for all.

"It's going to be a huge challenge. It's not a five-year plan we're talking about here," said Peter Anderson, a Simon Fraser University communications professor who, after the tsunami, spent time in Sri Lanka rebuilding community-based communications.

"This isn't simply a cheque-writing problem," added Fen Hampson, director of the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Uncertainty about the future is laced with fears hungry and angry residents of the flattened capital, Port-au-Prince, and its devastated surroundings will resort to major looting and violence, setting back generous multinational aid efforts already underway.

By week's end, there was increasing evidence panic had begun to take root as frustrated earthquake victims competed for scarce supplies of food and water.

There also are fears of a humanitarian disaster on the high seas if Haitians start boarding rickety boats in a desperate bid to escape the island, and that the competition for aid dollars will fuel divisions within a society already riddled with corruption.

Mr. Hampson said there is a huge potential for instability in Haiti.

"It (the earthquake) could cause people in a shock-stricken country to rally together," he said. "It also could have the opposite effect, which is to undermine the credibility of the government, which has been doing a reasonable job of putting Humpty Dumpty back together again."

The earthquake has wiped out marginal progress Haiti had enjoyed on the security, political and economic fronts since 2004 when -- in the aftermath of the coup that ousted Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power -- the United Nations, American and European international development banks, Canada and other countries signed on to the Interim Co-operation Framework.

Among other things, the Haiti accord committed participants to raising money for long-term financial aid and to providing on-the-ground training for police, educators, medical personnel and others. It also cleared the way for a 7,000-strong peacekeeping force -- staffed primarily by Canada and Brazil -- to move into the country.

"It was a crucial moment, everyone was on the same page," recalled Carlo Dade, executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas.

Mr. Dade, who has worked on several community projects in Haiti, said the ICF partners now need to intensify their co-operation to kick start long-term planning.

Dane Rowlands, a development specialist at Carleton University, said the solid level of international involvement in Haiti before the quake means it is better equipped to cope with the tragedy than it would have been before 2004.

The heartbreaking downside, however, is that many of the foreigners sharing their expertise in Haiti are now believed to be among the dead.

Canada's commitment to Haiti, its second-largest aid recipient after Afghanistan, is not in question. Before the earthquake, it had already allocated \$555-million to reconstruction and development efforts for a five-year period ending in 2011.

But analysts are eager to see what other countries are prepared to commit to long-term involvement in Haiti. Of particular interest is the degree to which Haiti's neighbours step up to the plate.

"Offering a really promising future is going to be hard, given Haiti's history, and delivering it will be an incredible challenge," said Mr. Rowlands, the associate director of the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs.

Mr. Rowlands said it's natural to hope for a "silver lining" in Haiti's latest horror -- that it will inspire people and countries to unite and pull the country out of its misery.

"I don't want to talk myself out of that rosy scenario," he said, "but realistically, I don't see that as being the case."

Any hope, however slim, that Haiti could end up graduating from the life-support it was on before the earthquake struck is weighed down in part, by a recognition that the media and the world seem to have a short attention span for such heart-wrenching tragedies.

"Initially, there's shock, horror and let's do something. After two or three weeks, people begin to lose interest," said Mr. Hampson.

"Haiti at the best of times, is not on the radar sights of most countries. The challenge is going to be staying the course, and keeping at it six months from now, a year from now and so on."

Matthew Smith, who has written a book on Haiti's tortured history, said he's concerned the international community will abandon Haiti, as it has in the past, before the rebuilding job is done.

"We live in a world of catastrophes now, so resources may be funnelled elsewhere," Mr. Smith said in an interview from Jamaica where he teaches at the University of the West Indies.

"Then we get back to the problem of the rest of the world turning a blind eye on Haiti, and then the attitude is usually, 'we have done what we could. If it fails again, it's their fault, not ours.' "