

Self-interest among reasons to help Haiti, experts say

BY JULIET O'NEILL, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JANUARY 16, 2010



An injured woman in a makeshift clinic in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti. Aid workers are struggling to help the thousands affected by Tuesday's earthquake.

Photograph by: Tyler Anderson/National Post, np

OTTAWA — Compassion is the main reason governments from around the globe are pitching in to help Haiti after the earthquake.

But there are other reasons too for an outpouring of aid efforts as disparate as English sniffer dogs and Iranian tents, Jamaican doctors, U.S. Marines and Canadian firefighters.

Those reasons range from staving off a potential refugee or health crisis in the region to following through on United Nations commitments.

Faraway China, for example, has no diplomatic relations with Haiti, but was among the first countries to pledge financial aid and send relief forces to the earthquake zone.

China is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and has more than 100 peacekeepers in Haiti, some of whom are missing in the rubble.

"China obviously has expertise, too," said Fen Hampson, an international affairs expert at Carleton University. "Dealing with these disasters, it's not a place for amateurs."

It's "a no-brainer" for wealthy and fairly close countries, such as the United States and Canada, which have significant Haitian diasporas, to help Haiti, said Hampson.

On top of the moral reasons for helping one of the world's poorest countries in a dire situation, it's in Canada's self-interest to help stave off a potentially much worse crisis in the Western hemisphere.

"A collapsed country that already has huge social, economic and political problems and has been a failed state, for lack of a better word, has problems that don't respect national borders, even if you're a small island," he said.

"Those problems can get exported very quickly in the form of refugees, in particular, and social anarchy. It's obviously in everyone's self-interest, not to mention the humanitarian imperative, to try to bring some order to the situation so that the problem doesn't come back and bite you in the foot."

In the case of Iceland, he said, "with small, itty-bitty countries, in some ways, it's a way to be seen to be doing something. They tend not to get noticed, so this is a way for them to make their presence felt."

Iceland dispatched an elite urban search-and-rescue team to Port-au-Prince almost immediately after the quake hit.

Carlo Dade, executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, said whether Brazil can help Haiti is "a major test" of that country's image and ability. Brazil has led the United Nations military stabilization force in Haiti for years.

"They've succeeded admirably in the military mission," he said. "The question is do they have the capacity to respond to this. Can they continue to step up to the plate?"

Ian Smillie, a Canadian foreign-aid expert, said guilt is a factor driving some countries.

"The pictures are just horrendous," he said. "The pictures of children and the buildings flattened and the presidential palace down, I think that's really heart-wrenching."

"Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the entire world and we've done collectively so little to make a difference there," he said. "There's a large UN peacekeeping presence but even then we don't seem to be able to get good government or good development.

"Maybe there's a sense of guilt about this huge festering sore right in our own backyard that we don't, any of us, seem to be able to deal with very well."