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It's up to Canada to grab the Haitian brass ring

By Carlo Dade

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One country needs to herd the quake donors. That job, according to American and Brazilian thinking, is ours for the taking

Amid the accounts of the devastation and relief effort that followed the earthquake in Haiti, one thing appears to have been lost in the rubble: awareness of signs of progress that had started to emerge in the country before the quake.

Although no one could claim that any corners had been turned, this progress should encourage the international community, especially Canada, as we move ahead.

The U.S. Congress had granted preferential access to Haitian garments, and foreign investors were beginning to inquire about opening new plants on the island. Preliminary estimates for economic growth for 2009 from the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean ranked Haiti fourth in the region - from the top, not the bottom. And last May, Bill Clinton was appointed UN special envoy for Haiti.

As emergency relief efforts continue, commentators and analysts from around the world are already calling for a Marshall Plan-type rebuilding effort. For such a plan to have any chance of success, it will be crucial to look at what has worked elsewhere in responding to disasters and at what has worked in Haiti, such as the 2004 multi-donor Interim Co-operation Framework. In every case, co-ordination was the key.

Yet, co-ordination requires not only commitment and good will from the international community but also someone to make sure that the commitment and good will are followed up on. Mr. Clinton has the recognition and stature to be the public conscience for Haiti. But given the many tasks at hand and the challenge of co-ordinating aid that's flowing from so many bureaucracies, at least one donor country needs to take the lead and devote substantial political and bureaucratic resources to keep international efforts focused.

That role is likely to fall to Canada.

Barack Obama, in a telephone conversation with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, suggested that the U.S., Brazil and Canada could join forces to co-ordinate the donor efforts in Haiti.

With unemployment at 10 per cent, ongoing financial crises, two wars and criticism on more aid to Haiti by Republicans, the U.S. can't go beyond managing the initial, short-term humanitarian response and undertake the job to rebuild Haiti.

Mr. da Silva has already indicated that Brazil is feeling overburdened by the ever-expanding mandate of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti that it leads. Though a leader amongst the

BRIC "emerging economies" (Brazil, Russia, India and China), Brazil is not yet a G8 power, and its responsibilities in Haiti are a test of the limits of its resources.

Given the contrast between Canada's 2011 withdrawal from Afghanistan and the ongoing issues constraining Brazil and the U.S., one can easily guess where the conversation between Mr. Obama and Mr. da Silva was heading - Canada should take the lead, and Brazil and the U.S. would back it up as best they can.

Canada has less on its plate internationally, although taking such a lead will not be without its challenges. Large deficits, a series of budget cuts that have weakened foreign commitments, and the politics of a minority government with a prorogued Parliament will all constrain this government's ability to focus on any foreign policy issue, let alone one this demanding.

To lead the international community in a Marshall Plan reconstruction effort will require not just a "whole of government" approach but a "whole of Canada" one. And for that, the government is going to have to make the case to Canadians to back a decades-long multibillion-dollar effort.

No one has ever made a compelling case to Canadians for their engagement in Haiti. Until the quake, most Canadians didn't know Haiti was our second-largest aid recipient, and even fewer knew how much was being sent.

A "whole of Canada" approach will also mean bringing all political parties on board to depoliticize the issue and keep it out of the "cheap shot" section of Question Period.

So far, the Canadian government has done just about everything right in Haiti - a vigorous and immediate response, intensive consultation and playing host to the first meeting of donors. The government, of course, also had a good track record in Haiti on which to build.

All of this, along with positive developments we had begun to see in Haiti before the quake, should give us hope.

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