

## Who will be left to rebuild country?

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When countries are knocked flat by war and disaster, it's the middle class that helps to pull them to their feet.

But in Haiti, where 80 per cent of the people are below the poverty line, most of the budget comes from international organizations and foreign aid agencies deliver the majority of basic social services, the tiny middle class has a far larger role to play.

This week's devastating earthquake has put that, and Haiti's future as a functioning country, in doubt.

"There's been huge emigration from Haiti, which made it less viable and less governable," says James Morrell, director of the Washington-based Haiti Democracy Project. "Some of the educated people are still there, and they are capable of making plans and running systems. But this can only make things worse."

The toll of dead and injured is still uncounted, as aid agencies race to rescue survivors. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been pledged for earthquake recovery, and the United Nations will soon hold a worldwide appeal for funds. But the scale of destruction is an indication that Haiti's most skilled people will be too few to power a reconstruction effort when the emergency aid is done.

The magnitude-7.0 earthquake shattered buildings in most upscale districts of the capital, Port-au-Prince, including government, UN and foreign aid offices.

Pétionville, a leafy suburb on a hill above the capital, was hit particularly hard.

"The engine of growth is a country's people," says Ludovic Comeau Jr. of De Paul University in Chicago, a former chief economist of Haiti's Central Bank. "But the best part of Haiti's human capital is already outside the country, and more will be leaving now."

Haiti has recently enjoyed a modest upturn, with international lenders cancelling a \$1.2 billion debt, and the U.S. Congress allowing Haitian textiles into America duty free.

But the ripple of hope has not reached many in the millions-strong diaspora – spread throughout North America and the neighbouring Dominican Republic – or turned the human tide of emigrants seeking escape from Haiti's poverty, violence and corruption.

"When I was at the central bank (in 2001), I had 10 bright, well-educated young economists working with me," says Comeau, who quit his privileged job for an American university post. "Practically all of them have left."

The best-off among those who remain are divided among the wealthy, influential "elite" who are often mired in corruption; a handful of professionals who have avoided widespread graft; and skilled workers and small-business people who are among a minority earning a living wage.

"There are a lot of mixed French and African descendants who form the business class, as well as emigrés to Haiti," says Heather Borquez, who visited Haiti for eight years when she was Plan International's country director for the Dominican Republic. "They probably have Miami bank accounts and access to money."

For those less fortunate, quitting Haiti in the wake of the earthquake may be the best option.

"There's no insurance in Haiti," says Carlo Dade, executive director of the Ottawa-based Canadian Foundation for the Americas.

"And I can't believe there are many savings. The burden will be on relatives in the diaspora, when they have to clear out their basements and prepare for those people to move in."

It's a problem that will loom larger as emergency efforts dwindle and rebuilding begins. An operation, some say, that must create a new country from scratch by tempting middle-class Haitians back from more comfortable locations.

"We need to recoup, rebirth and relaunch," says Comeau. "But we must be realistic. Haiti was built on a past of total warfare, and it practically destroyed the country."

"What we have been doing cannot work in the future. The bigger the setback the bigger the opportunity will be."