

HAITI'S "UNNATURAL DISASTER"

-- 200 Katrinas On Our Doorstep

PART ONE: FLASHBACKS

James S. Henry

Submerging Markets

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(In Haiti) we cleaned house, restored order, built public works ... We are still there....(W)e seem to have paid too little attention to making the citizens of these states more capable of reassuming the control of their own governments. But we have done a fine piece of material work, and the world ought to thank us.

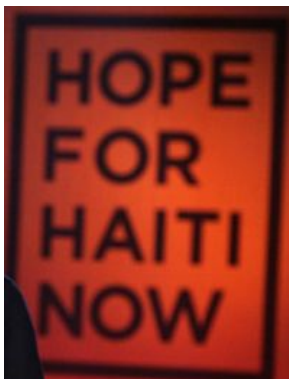
■ [FDR](#), *Foreign Affairs*, VI, 584, 1928

Less than 90 minutes by air southeast of Miami, Haiti's 10.1 million people are now enduring the hell-on-earth created by the 7.0 Mw, 35-second earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince on Tuesday January 12. This is the largest disaster in the Western Hemisphere since Columbus brought slavery, smallpox, and Christianity to Hispaniola in the 15th century.



It was not only one of [the top ten most lethal earthquakes](#) ever, but also [by far the most destructive ever, per unit of intensity](#). Many other more severe earthquakes have occurred in major urban areas in developing countries like Mexico and Iran without producing so many casualties.

That provides a clue to the fact that, as we'll explore in this series, **there really was nothing "natural" at all about the Haitian earthquake disaster** -- or, for that matter, about the thousands of lives [unnecessarily lost](#) to hurricanes and floods in Haiti in [2008](#), [2005](#), [2004](#), [1998](#), [1994](#), [1963](#), and [1954](#).



In reality, as this long series of excessively-costly disasters suggests, most of this suffering was avoidable and even predictable. And the poverty, inequality, excessive urbanization, landlessness, and poor construction that contributed to it were greatly by decades -- centuries, in fact -- of a closely-intertwined combination of **lousy government, self-serving domestic elites, and foreign interference** that for want of a more scientific term we will call plain old "Western imperialism" -- always conducted, of course, as Graham Greene liked to say, with the very best possible motives.

Uto now, the focus of the world community has been on disaster relief



and fund raising. We'll examine the pathologies of this aid effort in Part Two. But to achieve a sustained recovery, and avoid the perpetuation of Haiti's misery long into the future, we will soon need to focus on longer-term, **more political issues**.

Indeed, to achieve a sustained recovery, and break out of the perpetual cycle of vulnerability to "disasters" and dependence, Haiti needs something much more fundamental than billions in foreign aid, debt relief, or charitable contribution. In fact, what it needs may be **completely at odds with such dependence**.

As we'll argue, Haiti most requires strong, independent, popular government, by leaders who are not kleptocrats, blood-thirsty tyrants, or the indentured servants of foreign and domestic elites.

Unfortunately strong, independent government is not something that Haiti's wealthier neighbors have often encouraged.

FLASHBACKS -- RECURRENT PATTERNS

Sadly, it is possible to [repeat here almost verbatim many of the "lessons learned" that we drew from the](#) Sumatra tsunami "disaster," five year ago to the month. While Haiti differs from that situation in crucial respects, these conclusions provide a useful baseline for comparison:



"...Among the worst consequences of such catastrophic events are the **longer-term traumas** associated with disease, losing friends, family, fellow citizens, livelihoods, communities, and whole ways of life.

As usual -- and as was true in the case of 9/11, for example -- much of the initial media coveragehas focused on **body counts, other dire visible consequences, and the massive relief effort** that has followed.

That is to be expected. But before our attention span drifts too far off in the direction of some other new Third World calamity, it may be helpful to step back and examine some of the **systematic factors** that contribute to the high costs of such mishaps over and over again, and the extraordinary costs of this "natural".. disaster in particular.

Our overall theme is that there is really no such thing as a "natural disaster" per se. This is not to say that man-made forces were completely responsible.... But, as discussed below, the degree to which any such event results in a social and economic "disaster" is often to a great extent under our control.



In the case of (this disaster), its high costs **were entirely foreseeable, at least in a "sometime soon" sense**. Indeed, they were actually foreseen by several geological experts, some of whom have been advocating unsuccessfully for an (earthquake/ tsunami) early warning system for years.

(Note: this was true of both Indonesia and Haiti, which to this date still has no seismology station.) (The damage) could also have been substantially mitigated or avoided entirely with relatively modest investments -- certainly compared with the costs of reconstruction that will now have to be born.

Furthermore, the global response to this horrific disaster has been long on the size of aid pledges, dignitary press conferences, and “oh – the horror” press coverage.



It has been conspicuously short on actual aid getting through to the front lines (in the critical first days).



Today, two weeks after the disaster, aid efforts are well-funded, but they remain sluggish, disorganized, and ineffective, with at least as many additional lives in jeopardy right now for want of aid as perished in the original (waves) quake.

This is partly explained by the sheer difficulty of getting aid through... But, as explained below, it is also due to political factors, and the fact that the world community still runs humanitarian relief efforts like a competitive “pick-up” softball game.

Fortunately, this particular crisis seems to have captured the attention of the world's donor community. At this point, with more than (\$billions) in aid pledged by governments, multilateral institutions, and (dozens) of private relief organizations, the real problem is not money, but disorganization.

But we may want to demand that the UN, the US Government, the EU, and all these relief organizations get their acts together, and establish a permanent, well-run, well-funded global relief organization that can move more quickly the next time around.



Along the way, we should also pay far more attention to preventive systems and medical care for the masses that can help save the future victims of such disasters, before instant disaster relief becomes necessary.”

(-- from "SO-CALLED NATURAL DISASTERS," SubmergingMarkets, Jan. 1, 2005.)

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