

## HSPI Commentary Series

### DISASTER DIPLOMACY

HSPI Commentary 10

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The magnitude of the disaster faced by Haiti and its people last month spurred an understandably widespread and immediate response. Like the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia or the 2003 earthquake in Iran, there are times when the scale of devastation wrought by Mother Nature is simply so great as to dwarf whatever traditional interstate rivalries, animosities, or mistrust that may exist. While these times may be few and far between, they are arguably proof positive that nations and people can, and will, rise to the occasion when urgency demands, and reflect their better angels. The more cynical and the hard-headed realists among us might also say that nothing is done without a purpose, and even in this case, there may be larger strategic considerations and motivations at play.



Though not well reported, Cuba, Venezuela, and China have all taken a role in assisting and furthering Haiti's recovery. Cuba has provided field hospitals and 60 doctors to supplement its 400-strong medical staff presence that pre-dated the incident. Venezuela's contribution includes medical and search & rescue teams (520 aid personnel), food (10,000 tonnes), fuel (225,000 barrels of diesel and gasoline), medicines, reconstruction machinery, and tents (30,000). China has sent a 40-member medical team, a 60-member search & rescue team, and humanitarian aid in the form of cash and materials/supplies valued at over \$12 million (US).<sup>1</sup> Irrespective of motive—



<sup>1</sup>[http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/reports/daily/OCHA\\_R10\\_E15797.XLS](http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/reports/daily/OCHA_R10_E15797.XLS)

indeed even if one were to ascribe entirely humanitarian and compassionate concern as the driver here—these efforts could also be adjudged to be sound strategy.

Helping save lives and serve Haiti's national interest while simultaneously earning goodwill for the donor country amounts in practical terms to a potentially significant return on investment of emergency medical and other resources. An outstretched hand lent to those in need is rarely soon forgotten by the recipient. The United States would do well to bear this in mind, particularly when catastrophe materializes so close to home. The Americas are our neighborhood and making a serious effort to care for our neighbors in their time of acute need is at once an opportunity to do good and to serve the U.S. national interest. Such action might also counterbalance others' moves intended to increase their influence in the region.

The United States has made an enormous contribution to both health and safety in Haiti, providing thousands of troops (more than 20,000 at peak) and hundreds of medical personnel. These resources, however, were not sitting unused on a shelf when disaster struck the hemisphere. To the contrary, many of these assets were diverted from other missions—



including Afghanistan and Iraq—in order to serve pressing purposes in Haiti.<sup>2</sup> The same is true of other resources, such as those in the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) coordinated by the Department of Health and Human Services; the International Medical Surgical Response Team as well as Disaster Medical Assistance Teams (known as DMATs) ordinarily reserved for domestic use, were deployed to Haiti for emergency response. The day after the quake, NDMS sent 270

health and medical personnel.<sup>3</sup> The fact that we are stretched thin—and that we would be left more exposed if a natural or manmade incident were to occur simultaneously in the United States—is not well known or understood; yet we would be hard pressed to handle such an event as effectively as we otherwise might, were the resources in question not already allocated (once, if not twice, over).

To be clear, the answer is not to retreat or adopt a Darwinian posture according to which each looks out only for himself. To the contrary, the better choice is to stay the course in Haiti, while also formulating a smarter way to take care of others as well as ourselves, moving

<sup>2</sup>See for example: "24th MEU deploys to Haiti," <http://www.jdnews.com/news/24th-71985-camp-deploys.html>.

<sup>3</sup>"National Disaster Medical System Helping U.S. Hospitals Treat Survivors of Earthquake in Haiti," [http://www.hhs.gov/haiti/ndms\\_ushospitals.html](http://www.hhs.gov/haiti/ndms_ushospitals.html).

forward. Having a (military) joint service standing force dedicated to disaster diplomacy would mean that future crises would not result in a zero sum game in which an increase in others' security necessitates a commensurate reduction in the United States' own.<sup>4</sup> Instead, such a force would possess the expertise relevant to the situation, and its deployment would not affect our own disaster readiness.

Clearly there would be a price to be paid for this peace of mind as there is no way to achieve the desired end without investing additional resources. But the costs incurred should be conceived as directly serving both national security and the national interest. Importantly, these measures would be geared toward improving outcomes for the crisis-stricken in the short and medium terms. The idea is not to engage in long-term nation-building, but rather, to facilitate a smooth handoff of the baton to the Department of State and particularly the U.S. Agency for International Development, to pursue activities with a longer horizon which are core to these entities' missions and mandates, and for which these organizations are, in turn, uniquely suited.

If we do not step into the breach, others will—and in the case of Haiti, they already have (alongside us). Indeed Cuba's medical missions to underserved, often rural, areas in the Americas and beyond have not gone unnoticed, leading some to observe that the medical veneer has overlaid strategic considerations, specifically a calculated bid to win hearts and minds.<sup>5</sup> The larger geopolitical picture is not lost on Venezuela or China either, both of whom are acting to build their presence not only in the Americas, but globally, including Africa and the Middle East.



Nations, like people, tend to reap what they sow. Further institutionalizing our capacity to engage in disaster diplomacy could serve the best interests of all concerned.

*Photos courtesy of Paul M. Maniscalco*

<sup>4</sup>The U.S. Army currently maintains a Global Response Force. See <http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-world/haiti-adds-weight-to-us-military-burden-20100120-mllh.html>.

<sup>5</sup>See for example: "Cuba exports health," <http://mondediplo.com/2006/08/11cuba>; and "Cuban doctors in Haiti, and their promoters in Havana," <http://mondediplo.com/2006/08/11cuba>.



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