Rebuilding Haiti

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC LEADS INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

On January 12, 2010, a magnitude-7.0 earthquake struck Port-au-Prince, destroying the city and changing forever the dynamics between Haiti and the Dominican Republic — the two countries that share the Caribbean island of Hispaniola.

“In the 30 seconds that the earthquake lasted, more than 220,000 people lost their lives,” said Dominican President Leonel Fernández, speaking at a recent conference in Punta Cana on the future of Haiti. “In merely 30 seconds, more than 300,000 were injured and more than one million people lost their homes… Haiti lost 120 percent of its Gross Domestic Product… thousands of children were orphaned, thousands lost their closest relatives, and thousands more were plunged into a state of anguish and despair, bewilderment, and confusion.”

But in reality, he said, the Haitian tragedy began more than two centuries before this year’s catastrophe — a historic paradox Fernández hopes to reverse by taking a lead role among world leaders fighting for Haiti’s survival and ultimate success as a nation.

“It is the Haitian people who are the sole architects of their own destiny,” said Fernández, who was the first foreign leader to arrive in Port-au-Prince, only 16 hours after the quake hit. “The Dominican Republic — like other nations and international organizations represented here — seeks nothing more than to assist, to help, to accompany them in this colossal task of rebuilding a nation.”

Within a matter of days, several dozen mobile kitchens were transported across the border to Haiti to provide immediate relief for hungry Haitians — courtesy of the Dominican government.

Raymond Joseph, Haiti’s ambassador to the United States, noted that his Dominican counterpart, Ambassador Roberto Saladin, showed up at his office barely 20 minutes after the disaster to offer support.

“I have said from day one that the Fernández government has been phenomenal in its response,” said Joseph, who was born in the Dominican city of San Pedro de Macoris. He said that in the 1930s, when an earthquake hit the Dominican Republic, Haiti was the first to respond, adding that “President Fernández and President Préval have had a good friendship for a long time. So that really facilitates communications between the two in times of crisis.”

The Dominican private sector also responded in a timely fashion. Banco Popular Dominicano, one of the country’s largest banks, immediately organized aid convoys at the request of Partners in Health, a well-known NGO.

“A lot of worldwide attention was focused on Port-au-Prince, but what people didn’t realize was that everything moves through Port-au-Prince,” said John Strazzo, the bank’s vice-president for corporate security. “So with the capital city out of operation, the entire country was suffering — even those outside the earthquake zone. Nobody could get fuel or supplies.”

About half a dozen bank employees were involved in the operation, said Strazzo. All told, the bank trucked from the Dominican Republic to Haiti 410,000 bottles of water, 5,000 beds and sheets, 5,092 gallons of diesel fuel (to hospitals throughout Haiti), 9,971 units of food, and $413,000 in immediate relief donation.

Construction company Estrella S.A., based in Santiago de los Caballeros, flew planeloads of medicines into Haiti; in fact, CEO Manuel Estrella was among the first foreigners to land at badly damaged Port-au-Prince International Airport immediately following the quake. Estrella told us that his company, which is building a $50 million highway linking Port-au-Prince to St. Marc, was back on the job within a week, providing work to more than 1,000 Haitians. And the Dominican government plans to build a $50 million university for 22,000 Haitian students displaced by the quake.

“This is a remarkable turning point in the history of the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic,” said former U.S. president Bill Clinton, special UN envoy for Haiti at the conference. He praised the Dominican government for, among other things, building windmills near the Haitian border to provide 20 megawatts of electricity for Haiti — a 50% jump in Haitian electrical capacity once the two countries’ power grids are interconnected.

“This is the first time I have ever seen all of Haiti’s neighbors so committed to its future,” Clinton said. “It’s the best chance we have ever had to see Haiti emerge as a totally self-sustaining country.”

Leonel Fernández
President of the Dominican Republic

Photo courtesy of the Press Office of the Dominican Presidency
The World Bank, United Nations, Organization of American States, and other key institutions are helping Haiti get back on its feet after the January 12 earthquake that left its government and finances in shambles.

The Inter-American Development Bank estimates Haiti will need up to $14 billion to recover from the catastrophe. To that end, the IDB will write off whatever Haiti owes it and convert undisbursed loans to Haiti into grants.

“We will take up the commitment to make of Haiti a model to show how the bank can help a member country recover and rebuild after an extraordinary crisis,” said IDB President Luis Alberto Moreno. “To that end, we have agreed to deliver $2 billion in assistance to our sister nation over the next 10 years. Our goal is two fold: help Haiti build back better from its devastating earthquake, and help it achieve greater stability and prosperity. The bank will diligently pursue this challenge.”

José Miguel Insulza, secretary-general of the OAS, told us on the sidelines of the Punta Cana conference that his 47-member body is rushing to organize presidential elections at the end of this year.

“The UN is in charge of security, logistics, and infrastructure, while we are in charge of Haiti’s civil registry. This year, we expect to issue every Haitian citizen over 18 years old a national identity card,” he said. “That’s not the only thing we’re doing. We’re also putting together a national property register — something that’s never been done before in Haiti — a system so we can know who owns what.”

Insulza added that the Dominican Republic’s role in earthquake recovery has been “essential” since the beginning.

“The Dominicans have been at the front line continuously. They already have over 700,000 Haitians living here, but that’s not what’s motivating them,” he commented. “I think it’s solidarity and support for the country with which they share an island.”

Alexandre Abrantes, the World Bank’s special envoy for Haiti, agrees.

“It is true that contrary to previous administrations, this president [Leonel Fernández] seems eager to help. He’s extended his hand in friendship, and the Dominicans were very welcoming and took care of the Haitian refugees who fled to the Dominican Republic after the earthquake.”

Abrantes, a Portuguese citizen who took up his new post less than two months ago, previously managed the World Bank’s portfolio for Brazil. He’s served in 16 African countries and half a dozen more in Latin America — but never faced a challenge as big as this one before.

“The destruction is much bigger than I had anticipated,” Abrantes told us. “A lot of the rubble still has not been removed, making driving conditions and logistics very hard. And do not underestimate the difficulty of moving people out of tent cities. I thought people would be dying to get out of them, but it’s not the case. In many ways, these tent cities provide residents with services they did not have before.”

According to Abrantes, the World Bank’s Haiti portfolio comes to around $210.5 million. “After the quake, everything was destroyed, so we are helping those ministries in which we have a competitive advantage: restarting the Finance Ministry and the Central Bank, and recovering databases so that the salaries and pensions of civil servants can be paid.”
PROFILE: MINUSTAH’S EDMOND MULET

In December 1972, Edmond Mulet, then a cub reporter for the Guatemalan newspaper Alerta, arrived in Managua the day after a 7.5-magnitude earthquake devastated Nicaragua’s capital city. It wouldn’t be the last time he’d do such a thing.

In January 2010, Mulet landed in Port-au-Prince the day after a massive quake leveled the Haitian capital. One of the estimated 220,000 lives claimed by the tragedy was Tunisia’s Hédi Annabi, head of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) — and Mulet had just been assigned by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to take Annabi’s place.

“The UN lost 102 staffers; in the political section, only one of 10 survived,” he said. “All our houses were destroyed; the only one left intact was our logistics warehouse near the airport, so this is where we moved to. We had three showers for 400 people.”

Mulet, 59, is used to adversity. As a journalist, lawyer, and politician, he fought against the military dictatorship in his own country, and was jailed and later exiled for his views. In May 2006, following a political career and ambassadorial posts in Washington and Brussels, Mulet was appointed chief of MINUSTAH — but left just over a year later to temporarily become the UN’s assistant secretary-general for peacekeeping operations.

Unlike the aftermath of the Managua quake, Mulet says “there is definitely no corruption in the case of aid for Haiti. These are very responsible NGOs and institutions, and Americans can feel confident that donating through these institutions, their money will be well spent.”

As chief of MINUSTAH, Mulet oversees 15,000 peacekeepers, police officers, and administrative staff, and an annual budget of $650 million.

“I was head of MINUSTAH in 2006-07, just after [President Rene] Preval’s inauguration,” he recalled. “At that time, my main task was to get rid of all the gang leaders who were terrorizing Port-au-Prince. We arrested more than 850 of them, but they escaped the day of the earthquake, so we’re after them again.”

Mulet says he’s encouraged by the outpouring of support from Haiti’s Dominican friends.

“President Fernández really mobilized his people,” he said. “After the quake, private Dominican citizens loaded up their cars by the thousands, bringing water, juice, rice, and sugar over the border. The government took hospital kitchens to Haiti and set them up to prepare food for survivors. What really moved me was seeing young men and women in Santo Domingo wearing T-shirts that said ‘Yo Soy Haitiano.’ There was a real sense of solidarity.”

Mulet’s biggest challenge now is ensuring that international aid goes to earthquake victims while keeping unrest and political violence to a minimum.

“With regard to the humanitarian response and the emergency phase, I think we did pretty well providing shelter, water, and food for victims of the earthquake, removing rubble here and there,” he said. “What I’m concerned about is that we’re not moving beyond that. We have not shifted gears from the urgent response into the mid-term development programs. Hopefully this new commission will balance the need to continue the urgent response with the development of long-term projects and investments.”

Mulet added, “The main problem in Haiti is not the weakness or fragility of the state; it’s the complete absence of state. However, I have no option but to be optimistic. This can be a real turning point for Haiti, if we do things right.”
The Dominican resort of Punta Cana—a roughly 10-hour drive east of the Haitian-Dominican border—was the June 2 venue for an international conference aimed at helping Haiti recover from the earthquake that devastated its capital earlier this year.

Under tight security, hundreds of delegates from 33 nations converged on Punta Cana’s Moon Palace Hotel for the “World Summit on the Future of Haiti.” Their objective: to get donors to disburse the money they pledged at a March conference in New York in the wake of one of modern history’s worst natural disasters.

Participants invited by Dominican President Leonel Fernández included Bill Clinton, the UN special envoy for Haiti, as well as Haitian President René Préval and Prime Minister Jean Max Bellerive. All four men honored Sonia Marmolejos, a Dominican woman and local hero who breast-fed dozens of starving babies whose mothers had either died or were seriously injured in the quake.

“Haiti is not alone and will never be, as we will be here forever,” said Fernández, “contributing not only with the recovery from the effects of the earthquake, but also the harmful effects of history.”

So far, Fernández announced, more than US$11 billion in assistance to Haiti has been promised by governments around the world. Brazil, which has thousands of UN peacekeepers in Haiti, was the first contributor to the multinational donor trust fund, pledging US$40 million. Other donations include 326 million euro (US$395 million) pledged by French President Nicolas Sarkozy between now and 2011; the cancellation of US$395 million in Haitian debts to Venezuela’s Petrocaribe; the establishment of a US$2 billion Venezuelan “solidarity fund” for the importation of fuel through 2016, and an annual US$200 million contribution from the Inter-American Development Bank for the next 10 years.

Smaller donations have been announced by Taiwan (US$121 million), Norway (US$100 million); Uruguay (US$3 million); Equatorial Guinea (US$2 million) and Peru (US$1.7 million), while the Dominican Republic is funding construction of a US$50 million university in Haiti.

Préval, whose speech followed a short video depicting the collapse of Haiti’s National Palace in Port-au-Prince, told Fernández, “I will never forget your visit to Haiti. You were the first head of state who called on us.”

Since the earthquake, said Clinton, “I think the Haitian people have done remarkably well under the circumstances. They have used this terrible tragedy to reimage their future — but it is a future that cannot be achieved without the support of the international community.

In a highly unusual gesture for a former U.S. president, Clinton lavished praise on Cuba’s post-earthquake medical assistance to its Caribbean neighbor, noting that “Haiti may well be the only subject in which you can find Venezuela, Cuba, and the United States in complete agreement.”

He added: “If each of us commits to doing what we can, I believe we can help the Haitian people modernize the economy, build individual empowerment, restore their environment, and, for the first time ever, become a completely self-sustaining partner in this region and give their own people the future they deserve.”

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Bill Clinton, UN special envoy and former U.S. president
In an unprecedented gesture of solidarity, the Dominican Republic is constructing a major public-works project in Haiti. The proposed Universidad Modelo — to rise in the northern city of Cap-Haitien — will serve 22,000 Haitian students displaced by the recent earthquake.

“This is the first time we’ve ever done something like this. It proves the bond we have with the Haitian people,” said Carlos Castillo, the Dominican consul-general in Haiti. He explained that Cap-Haitien was chosen as part of the Préval government’s policy of decentralization in the wake of the earthquake that destroyed Port-au-Prince — and also to develop the northern part of the country.

Félix Bautista, director of the Office of Engineers and Supervisors of State Works (OISOE), told us in an exclusive interview that the project represents an investment of around US$50 million. Of that total, US$35 million will be financed by the Dominican state, with the remaining US$15 million coming from the private sector in the form of cement, steel, door fixtures, and other construction materials.

According to Bautista, the proposed university — sitting on a 100,000-square-meter tract of land — will consist of eight three-level buildings containing a total of 144 classrooms. Two additional buildings will contain laboratories for chemistry, biology, physics, nursing, languages, and information technology.

A two-story library covering 2,600 square meters will be the university’s largest structure, along with a smaller two-story administration building. Also part of the plan: an 850-square-meter service center, basketball court, parks, and a cafeteria serving 6,000 meals a day.

Bautista, a civil engineer and high-profile politician who has overseen the building of universities, hospitals, and other public works throughout the Dominican Republic, said construction of Universidad should be completed within a two-year time frame.

“For me, this project is very important because it will amplify and consolidate relations between our two countries,” Bautista told us. “With this project, the Dominican Republic demonstrates our solidarity with the people of Haiti.”
The Dominican Republic’s commitment to Haiti following the January earthquake “is one of the few positive stories today in the hemisphere,” says Michael Shifter, president of Inter-American Dialogue in Washington.

“If you look at all the issues going on today, Haiti at least provides some opportunity for cooperation. Just the magnitude of this tragedy trumps ideological and political differences — especially the response of the Dominican Republic, considering that bilateral relationship hasn’t always been easy or smooth, and still isn’t,” said Shifter. “Whether it’s motivated out of self-interest or just the spirit of generosity, the fact is President Fernández has been extremely helpful, engaged, and committed to this whole effort.”

But that commitment didn’t begin on January 12, argues Caribbean expert Eduardo Gamarra.

“Even before the earthquake, the Dominican Republic often felt that it had to unfairly shoulder the burden of instability, poverty, and social ills stemming from Haiti’s collapse,” said Gamarra, political science professor at Miami’s Florida International University. “The Dominican government began thinking about a strategy for Haiti long before it was the ‘in’ thing to do, and it did so out of a sense of national urgency. President Fernández created a blueprint for thinking about Haiti from the perspective of integration, investment, and how to help Haiti overcome its international isolation and help consolidate its democratic process.”

Close to one million Haitians live in the Dominican Republic, and around 3,000 Dominicans live in Haiti. Yet the earthquake suddenly motivated Dominicans to care more about their less fortunate Haitian neighbors, said Gamarra, “even pushing forward the president’s vision of harmony and good relations with Haiti. He wanted gradual cultural integration, and this tragedy kicked it forward many, many years. So the outpouring of solidarity in my view is a very genuine thing.”

José Raúl Perales, senior associate at the Woodrow Wilson International Center’s Latin America program, says the role of the Dominican Republic has been “very constructive and fundamental, from the minute the emergency happened up until now,” with the current focus more on long-term policy.

“This is the result of several things,” he explained. “One of course is the sheer tragedy. Second is the recognition that the Dominican Republic’s own security and well-being depends in large part on a stable, prosperous Haiti. I won’t deny that there is political opportunity for Leonel Fernández here. He’s played a leadership role in this region — in Honduras, in Haiti, and mediating between Venezuela and Colombia — and this is very much typical of his persona and his government.”

Inter-American Dialogue’s Shifter says he’s heard lots of talk about putting Haitians in charge of their country’s recovery efforts, but that “it’s hard to know to what extent this is realistic or practical. This country has been completely devastated, and didn’t have strong institutions to begin with. There needs to be very substantial support to enable the Haitians to exercise control. It’s not going to happen overnight.”
Bottled water, tents, and food rations saved thousands of lives in the immediate aftermath of Haiti’s January 12 earthquake, but only job creation can sustain long-term recovery — and that depends on further opening the crucial U.S. market to Haitian exports.

“When I arrived in Washington in 2004, I came with a slogan: Haiti is open for business. We had to create a secure atmosphere in the country,” said Raymond Joseph, Haiti’s ambassador to the United States. “Secondly, I had to convince Congress to give us preferential treatment for products made in Haiti, especially textiles. I worked very hard, and in July 2006, Congress — then controlled by Republicans — agreed to give me the HOPE (Haitian Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement) Act, but for only three years.”

In 2007, Capitol Hill — by then under Democratic control — extended HOPE for 10 years, becoming HOPE-II, and with fewer restrictions, thanks to the influence of Rep. Charlie Rangel (D-New York) and senators Max Baucus (D-Montana), Sander Levin (D-Michigan) and Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa). This has helped revive Haiti’s assembly industry, which in the 1980s employed 60,000 workers but in recent years had tumbled to around 15,000.

“Since HOPE’s passage, we have doubled that, and now companies from South Korea and Brazil are looking at Haiti, and not only in textiles,” said Joseph.

On May 5, Congress passed the bipartisan Haiti Economic Lift Program (HELP) Act, which expands duty-free access to the U.S. market for additional Haitian textile and apparel exports, and extends existing trade preference programs under HOPE until 2020.

The objective: to alleviate Haiti’s 80% unemployment rate in the formal sector — even before the quake — which forced three-quarters of the population to live on less than US$2 a day.

Just as importantly, HELP also opens the door further to Dominican products; since factories and infrastructure in Haiti were largely destroyed by the earthquake, the immediate theater of operations is the Dominican Republic. To date, some 168 companies in the Dominican Republic now benefit from the HELP Act.

“This legislation is not a panacea for all of the new challenges that Haiti now faces, but it sends a clear message to buyers and investors that Haiti does not stand alone in meeting the challenges before it,” Rangel declared. “We, Americans, stand with Haiti.”

Despite some opposition from domestic producers worried that China would use Haiti as a back door to gain entry into the U.S. market, the bill enjoyed strong bipartisan support, said Joseph, who lobbied tirelessly for its passage.

“Countries like the Dominican Republic and Brazil have a chance to benefit from HELP, and also help Haiti become a powerhouse — not only in textiles but in other products as well,” he said. “The average Dominican wage is quite high compared to Haiti, and for that reason, the D.R. has lost jobs to the Far East, mainly China. But now that HELP permits some Dominican products to be finished in Haiti, they’re coming back.”

One of the biggest cross-border employers is Grupo M, a Dominican garment manufacturer that employs 4,300 Haitians, more than half of them women, in the town of Ouanaminthe. Another 1,000 people work on the Dominican side of the border near Dajabón. Joseph said Grupo M — owned by Dominican businessman Fernando Capellan — plans to expand to 15,000 workers over the next five years thanks to HELP.

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HAITI PROVIDES BOOMING MARKET FOR DOMINICAN EXPORTS

Despite their rocky history, Haiti and the Dominican Republic are today not only good neighbors, but excellent business partners.

Even before the tragedy that befell Port-au-Prince, the two countries that share the island of Hispaniola were doing US$700 million a year in official bilateral commerce. Add informal cross-border transactions, and total annual trade exceeds US$1 billion. Haiti is now the world’s second-largest market for Dominican products, topped only by the U.S.

Since the earthquake, however, exports are soaring — prompted by Haiti’s urgent need for everything from garbanzo beans to gasoline.

“It’s hard to put a positive spin to the blood that was shed [during the earthquake], but our companies are the best-positioned to satisfy the needs of the Haitian people,” said Eddy Martínez, the Dominican Republic’s secretary of state for exports and investment.

In the first four months of 2010, Dominican exports to its neighbor came to US$227 million — up 17.5% from the US$193 million in official exports for the same period last year. That does not include foodstuffs, clothing, and other goods sold at a dozen or so informal markets along the Dominican-Haitian border.

“Haiti is a strategic partner for the Dominican Republic in every sense of the word, and we feel the effects of the earthquake and want to help as much as possible,” said Martínez. “Whether it’s the UN, NGOs, foreign embassies, or outside companies, buyers should look at what the Dominican Republic has to offer. First look at Haiti and what Haiti is capable of producing. And if Haiti cannot produce it, then we believe the Dominican Republic could be a natural supplier, because a variety of products — food, cement, steel bars, plastics — are made here at competitive prices with good distribution networks that we’ve developed over many years.”

Speaking recently at a meeting of the Dominican Association of Exporters (ADOEXPO), Customs Chief Rafael Camilo said the local manufacturing sector has benefited from the upswing in exports. He added that the commercial, transport, and farming sectors have also boosted shipments to Haiti.

Gregory Mevs, president of the Haitian Chamber of Agriculture and CEO of Wingroup, a private conglomerate, has been asked to head up a binational entity tentatively known as Quisqueya Development Corp.

“The idea is to make sure both countries reinforce one another’s competitive advantages. For example, we’re looking at opening call centers using Dominican infrastructure and investment, and the French-speaking capacity of the Haitians.”

The entity’s first order of business is a US$120-million free zone located 30 minutes east of Port-au-Prince near the Dominican border. The Chambrum economic cluster project would focus on textiles, greenhouses, energy, and the IT sector. If all goes well, the zone should be finished within three years. “In order to relocate 30,000 to 40,000 people from Port-au-Prince, we need to create the jobs first,” explained Mevs. “You have to rebuild Haiti from the bottom up, around jobs and dignity. You can’t rebuild around charity.”

The task of rebuilding Haiti is the most daunting challenge the Western Hemisphere has faced in decades. Those who haven’t traveled to post-earthquake Haiti cannot begin to fathom the sheer scale and complexity of this country’s suffering.

The equally tragic 2004 tsunami struck only coastal areas, leaving unharmed the central governments of affected nations. In centralized Haiti, however, the quake not only brought Port-au-Prince to its knees, but with it the entire country.

This has created a unique opportunity to mend the historical distortions of the past. In sharp contrast to previous Dominican administrations, President Leonel Fernández has proven to be a world-class statesman. His unwavering dedication to Haiti has trickled down to all layers of Dominican society, paving the way for a new era of tolerance, fraternity, and integration on Hispaniola.

But urgent challenges loom ahead. A recurring criticism of Haitian President René Préval has been his post-earthquake aloofness — a perceived disconnect that plays right into the hands of political “has-beens” like Jean-Bertrand Aristide and François “Baby Doc” Duvalier, who are exacerbating social tensions as a way to return to power.

On our most recent visit to Port-au-Prince, we witnessed organized militias violently demanding Préval’s resignation ahead of the scheduled November presidential elections.

The international community must respond by uniting behind Préval and his prime minister, Jean-Max Bellerive — and by convincing Haitians of the dangers of increased social and political chaos should the current government be allowed to fall.

The Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission (IHRC), inaugurated June 14 in Port-au-Prince, has its own challenges. First, it must make sure foreign governments honor their pledges of financial support and begin funneling money to Haiti’s mid- and long-term reconstruction — with full transparency and accountability. Secondly, it must keep Haitians and foreign donors updated regularly so progress can be measured.

Finally, the IHRC must ensure, with the help of the MINUSTAH, the OAS and others that the November elections not be undermined by politicians of the past who hope to profit from this tragedy. Not doing so would jeopardize both the stability of Hispaniola and the credibility of all those involved.

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