

Haiti: after the catastrophe, what are the perspectives?

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Port-au-Prince, 27th January 2010 - Statement by the coordinating committee of progressive organisations (see the list of the participating platforms and individual organizations at the foot of the text).

To all our partners

On January 12th 2010 an earthquake of unprecedented force struck our country with dramatic consequences for the people of many areas in the west and south east, and for the country as a whole. The tremor registered 7.3 on the Richter scale, and the irreparable losses it caused have left our country in mourning and unbearable pain. The tragedy we are facing today is certainly one of the gravest in our history, and its traumatic effects will stamp their mark on our 21st century.

The partial accounts that have already been disseminated go some way to expressing the dreadful, indescribable horror that we collectively lived through during those endless 35 seconds on January 12th, and which have left so powerful a legacy of pain and tears. More than 150,000 dead, 500,000 injured, over a million homeless, tens of thousands who have lost limbs, 300,000 refugees who have fled into the countryside, more than 3 million disaster victims who, from one minute to the next, saw their lives, their homes and their society changed forever. A whole society is traumatised, and lives in fear of probable aftershocks or of a second earthquake.

Our organizations have all been profoundly affected by this event. We have lost close relatives, work colleagues, children, young people, professionals with dreams full of promise and skills, buildings, equipment, tools, and a huge body of documents embodying thirty years of the collective experience of grassroots and community organizations. The losses are enormous and irreplaceable.

Despite our pain, it is important that that we all pause to reflect on what has happened and to draw from this tragic experience the lessons and the guidance that will allow us to continue our tireless dedication to building a different country, one that is capable of overcoming the cycle of dependency and destruction and rising to the level of the dreams of universal emancipation of its founders and of all the people of Haiti.

The extent of the disaster is certainly linked to the character of the colonial and neo-colonial State our country has inherited, and the

imposition of neo-liberal policies over the last three decades. The extreme centralization around the 'Republic of Port-au-Prince' imposed after the US occupation of 1915-1934 is certainly one determining factor. In particular the complete liberalization of the housing market has opened a space for rampant speculation by every kind of opportunist.

We have been deeply moved by the extraordinary spirit of solidarity displayed by the people of the metropolitan area who for the first three days after the disaster responded with self-organization, helping to save the lives of thousands of people trapped under the rubble and building 450 refugee camps which made it possible for 1.5 million people to survive thanks the sharing out of the available resources (food, water, and clothing). We honour and respect the people of Port-au-Prince! These spontaneous organs of solidarity must now play a central role in the reconstruction and reconceptualising of our national space.

We address this letter to our partners, and the national and international networks in which we participate, to inform you of the actions we have taken and our objectives for the short, medium, and long term.

For over a week now a group of organizations and platforms have been meeting regularly to address the new situation, setting up new strategies and methods of work. As representatives of the organizations and platforms who are signatories to this document, and as a result of a number of meetings to assess the new situation and define common strategies, we have adopted a position based on the following guidelines:

To contribute to defending the main gains made by the popular and social movements of Haiti now threatened by the new situation.

To help to respond to the urgent immediate needs of the people, by setting up community service centres with the means to respond to the following needs: food, primary health care, medical and psychological assistance for those in shock as a result of the earthquake.

To take advantage of the presence of the international press in our country to present a different image to that disseminated by the imperialist forces.

To establish new ways of overcoming the atomisation and dispersal which are among the central weaknesses of our organizations.

This process of gathering our forces should begin with the creation of a common space where our six teams can provisionally come together while they continue to work independently, while at the same time putting in place permanent mechanisms for mutual exchange and joint work. We will seek to establish a collective approach in seeking common responses to our problems, and to build a real and viable alternative based on popular democracy.

As far as the immediate emergency is concerned, we are in the process of setting up centres in each area of the city. One is already operational at 59 Avenue Poupelard in the premises of a community school run by the SAJ/VEYE YO (Solidarite Ant Jen) organization. It provides for nearly 300

people who are given two meals a day and accommodated in tents. The centre offers them consultations, medicine, and psychological support. These services are also offered to those living in the refugee camps that have been spontaneously set up in the area. The centre functions thanks to the generous support of a group of Haitian professionals (doctors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers) with the support of the aid organization, Deutsche Not Ärzte e.V. (German Emergency Doctors Union) - Cap Anamur. We are trying to extend the centres into other metropolitan districts badly hit by the earthquake and where no centres of this kind currently exist. We anticipate that four more will be set up in the districts of Carrefour (Martissant, Fontamara) and Gressier. We would call upon the solidarity of all our partners in helping to ensure that they function effectively.

At the same time, the two platforms and four organizations involved have set up a meeting and coordination centre at the offices of FIDES-Haiti, in Impasse Gabriel-Rue de Fernand in Canapé Vert. This space is open to other platforms and organizations of the popular and democratic movement. We are committed to mobilizing the different elements of that movement with a view to, on the one hand, extending emergency help to the disaster victims, and on the other, to lead to the formulation of a joint plan designed to rebuild our organizations and institutions. We will communicate this plan, and the concrete projects associated with it, to our partners as soon as possible.

The emergency aid effort we are involved in is alternative in character and we expect to advocate a method of work which will denounce the traditional practices in the field of humanitarian aid which do not respect the dignity of the victims and which contribute to the reinforcement of dependency. We are advocating a humanitarian effort that is appropriate to our reality, respectful of our culture and our environment, and which does not undermine the forms of economic solidarity that have been put in place over the decades by the grassroots organizations with which we work.

Finally, we would like to salute once more the extraordinary generosity of spirit which has moved public opinion across the world in the wake of the catastrophe we have suffered. We acknowledge it and we believe that this is the moment for creating a new way of seeing our country that will make it possible to build an authentic solidarity free of paternalism, pity, and the taint of inferiority. We should work to maintain this spirit of solidarity as against the momentary impact of fashion and media exaggeration. The response to the crisis has proved that in certain situations the people of the world can move beyond hasty judgments based on sensationalism and stereotypes.

Massive humanitarian aid is indispensable today, given the scale of the disaster, but it should be deployed in terms of a different vision of the reconstruction process. It should connect with a break from the paradigms that dominate the traditional circuits of international aid. We would hope to see the emergence of international brigades working together with our organizations in the struggle to carry out agrarian reform and an integrated urban land reform programme, the struggle against illiteracy and for reforestation, and for the construction of new modern, decentralised and universal systems of education and public health.

We must also declare our anger and indignation at the exploitation of the situation in Haiti to justify a new invasion by 20,000 U.S. Marines. We condemn what threatens to become a new military occupation by U.S. troops, the third in our history. It is clearly part of a strategy to remilitarise the Caribbean Basin in the context of the imperialist response to the growing rebellion of the peoples of our continent against neo-liberal globalization. And it exists also within a framework of pre-emptive warfare designed to confront the eventual social explosion of a people crushed by poverty and facing despair. We condemn the model imposed by the U.S. government and the military response to a tragic humanitarian crisis. The occupation of the Toussaint Louverture international airport and other elements of the national infrastructure has deprived the Haitian people of part of the contribution made by Caricom, by Venezuela, and by some European countries. We condemn this conduct, and refuse absolutely to allow our country to become another military base.

As leaders of the organizations and platform who have set this process in motion, we are writing to share our initial analysis of the situation. We are certain, and you have already shown this to be true, that you will continue to support our work and our struggles in the framework of the construction of an alternative from which our country can rise again from this terrible catastrophe and struggle to break free of the cycle of dependency.

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Details of how to make donations to support this initiative to follow.

P.S.

* Translated from French by Mike Gonzalez.