

Haiti is not Alone
Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

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The disaster in Haiti shows once again something that we, as human beings, have always known: that even amid the worst devastation, there is always hope.

I saw that for myself this week in Port au Prince. The UN suffered its single greatest loss in history. Our headquarters in the Haitian capital was a mass of crushed concrete and tangled steel. How could anyone survive, I thought? Yet moments after I departed, with a heavy heart, rescue teams pulled out a survivor – alive, after five days, buried, without food or water. I think of it as a small miracle, a sign of hope.

Disasters such as that in Haiti remind us of the fragility of life, but they also reaffirm our strength. We have seen horrific images on television: collapsed buildings, bodies in the streets, people in dire need of food, water and shelter. I saw all this, and more, as I moved around the stricken city. But I also saw something else — a remarkable expression of human spirit, people suffering the heaviest blows yet demonstrating extraordinary resilience.

During my brief visit, I met with many ordinary people. A group of young men near the ruins of the presidential palace told me of wanting to help rebuild Haiti. Beyond the immediate crisis, they hope for jobs, a future with dignity, work to do. Across the street, I met a young mother with her children living in a tent in a public park, with little food. There were thousands like her, patiently enduring, helping one another as best they could. She had faith that help would soon come, as did others. “I came to offer hope,” I told them. “Do not despair.” In return she, too, asked the international community to help Haiti to rebuild — for her children, for the generations of tomorrow.

For those who have lost everything, help cannot come soon enough. But it is coming, and in growing amounts despite very difficult logistical challenges in a capital city where all services and capacity are gone. As of Monday morning, more than 40 international search and rescue teams with more than 1700 staff were at work. Water supplies are increasing; tents and temporary shelters are arriving in larger numbers. Badly damaged hospitals are beginning to function again, aided by international medical teams. Meanwhile, the World Food Program is working with the U.S. army to distribute daily food rations to nearly 200,000 people. The agency expects to reach as many as one million people within the coming weeks, building toward two million.

We have seen an outpouring of international aid, commensurate with the scale of this disaster. Every nation, every international aid organization in the world, has mobilized for Haiti’s relief. Our job is to channel that assistance. We need to make sure our help gets to the people who need it, as fast as possible. We cannot have essential supplies sitting in warehouses. We have no time to lose, nor money to waste. This requires strong

and effective coordination—the international community working together, as one, with the United Nations in the lead.

This critical work began from the first day, both among UN and international aid agencies as well as among key players—the United Nations working closely with the United States and the countries of Europe, Latin America and many others to identify the most pressing humanitarian needs and deliver what is required. These needs must be grouped into well-defined “clusters,” so that the efforts of all the various organizations complement rather than duplicate one another. A health cluster run by the World Health Organization, for example, is already organizing medical assistance among 21 international agencies.

The urgency of the moment will naturally dominate our planning. But it is not too early to begin thinking about tomorrow, a point that President Rene Preval emphasized when we met. Though desperately poor, Haiti had been making progress. It was enjoying a new stability; investors had returned. It will not be enough to rebuild the country as it was, nor is there any place for cosmetic improvements. We must help Haiti build back better, working side by side with the government, so that the money and aid invested today will have lasting benefit, creating jobs and freeing it from dependence on the world’s generosity.

In this sense, Haiti’s plight is a reminder of our wider responsibilities. A decade ago, the international community began a new century by agreeing to act to eliminate extreme poverty by the year 2015. Great strides have been made toward some of these ambitious “Millennium goals,” variously targeting core sources of global poverty and obstacles to development from maternal health and education to managing infectious disease. Yet progress in other critical areas lags badly. The bottom line: we are very far from delivering on our promises of a better future for the world’s poor.

As we rush to Haiti’s immediate aid, let us keep in mind this larger picture. That was the message I received, loud and clear, from those people on the streets of Port au Prince. They asked for jobs, dignity and a better future. That is the hope of the all world’s poor, wherever they might live. Doing the right thing for Haiti, in its hour of need, will be a powerful message of hope for them as well.

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