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### The reconstruction of Haiti must be based on justice

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*A survivor of the earthquake engaged in cleanup efforts in the Port-au-Prince neighbourhood of Belair. Photo: Paul Jeffrey/ACT*

**As churches and church related organizations mobilize resources to bring immediate relief to the people of Port-au-Prince, they are also advocating for the international community to waive Haiti's foreign debt while building a more sustainable future for the country.**

Two weeks after the country's worst earthquake in two centuries struck on 12 January, the plight of the victims has prompted a worldwide mobilization of churches' resources.

Pledges of funds, delivery of emergency aid items and appeals for donations are reported from every corner of the globe, while messages of solidarity, prayers and even hymns to express the sorrow flow in from near and far.

The situation of Haiti's devastated capital justifies such a level of mobilization and much more, according to church witnesses there. "Thousands of houses are flattened", reported soon after the earthquake the president of the Protestant Federation of Haiti, the Rev. Sylvain Exantus, in an email calling for international solidarity.

"Thousands of houses are flattened, as well as schools, ministries' buildings, the national government headquarters, the Justice Palace, churches, the Cathedral, the Parliament, the Ministry of Education, hospitals", said Exantus, who survived the quake but was blocked downtown and could only reach his home a day later, where he found his family alive. "It is chaos in Port-au-Prince."

The city and the surrounding urban area are home to between 2.5 and 3 million people. At least 150,000 people were killed, a figure that could rise to 200,000.

"The disaster in Haiti has brought to the fore the heavy burden its people have been carrying over long decades because of political instability and poverty", said World Council of Churches (WCC) general secretary the Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit.

As the country's foreign debt crucially contributes to its impoverishment, the WCC and ecumenical partners are advocating for an immediate and unconditional debt cancellation as a way to make certain Haiti can rebuild itself

in the long term.

#### Facing total devastation

The damage to a city "already beleaguered with staggering poverty" is massive, said a report issued by ACT Alliance, a global ecumenical grouping of churches and related agencies working on emergency relief and development and a partner organization of the WCC.

"An estimated 60 to 80 percent of buildings in Port-au-Prince were destroyed. More than one million people are without adequate shelter and no immediate prospect of accommodation in camps", added the report. To make things worse, looting and violence were reported during the first days as people competed for limited food and water supplies.

The devastation has not spared the churches. The Roman Catholic archbishop of Port-au-Prince, Joseph Serge Miot, is among the dead, as is the Rev. Bienne L'Amérique, vice-president of the Protestant Federation of Haiti. Many other members of the clergy are reported dead, missing or wounded. Church buildings, facilities and schools

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"A lot of church members are now homeless. They spend the night in the streets. They are starving", reported the Rev. Gedeon Eugene, vice-president of the Haitian Baptist Convention, a WCC member church, in an email two days after the earthquake. "They cannot cook, they are thirsty, they are injured", he added.

The convention sent a team of pastors to Port-au-Prince from Cap-Haïtien, a city in the Northern coast of the island, in order to bring first aid items and assess the situation. "They are visiting some survivors, brothers and sisters from our churches, encouraging those whose parents, children, husbands, wives died in the disaster, giving a hopeful word to the homeless", said Eugene.

"From the first day, people gathered to pray and sing together", said Sylvia Raulo, who is the representative in Haiti of the Lutheran World Federation's Department of World Service and was in the city during the earthquake. "There are no answers for a tragedy like this, but churches share in people's suffering and help them to express their pain, playing a role of accompaniment."

"Many people are leaving Port-au-Prince for the countryside", said in an online conversation the general secretary of the Protestant Federation of Haiti, the Rev. Romulus Fritz-Gérald. He survived the quake as did his family. His wife is a nurse who is working "20 hours per day" at the hospital.

As quake survivors become internally displaced people in their thousands, they pose an additional challenge to the relief agencies, which have already faced huge obstacles in getting supplies into the country due to the collapse of infrastructure such as roads and bridges.

However, ACT Alliance members are providing tons of food, tents, hygiene, health and baby care kits, blankets, water purifiers, and portable hospitals. The alliance is preparing to step up its work with psychosocial support, shelter/site planning, as well as water and sanitation.

As time passes and people gradually realize what has happened, they will need immense courage to face the consequences of total devastation, said Raulo. "While humanitarian aid is coming in – and huge amounts of development aid will be needed in the long term to rebuild the public infrastructure – spiritual support is equally important right now and will continue to be so in the coming months."

## **Grants, not loans**

For the WCC general secretary, "the time has come for the international community – politicians, business and civil society organizations – to focus on how Haiti can become sustainable". This is the message Tveit intends to bring to the meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, which he is attending this week. The forum has set aside a time to discuss the situation in Haiti.

According to Tveit, "authentic development for Haiti will take some bold steps by the international community in addition to the current emergency efforts". First among them is "the immediate and unconditional cancellation of the country's foreign debt. It would be morally untenable to do otherwise at this time of extraordinary hardship and destruction".

Despite having had 1.2 billion US dollars of debt written off last June by the international financial institutions, Haiti's debt amounts to some 640 million dollars, with annual payments of about 50 million dollars just to service the interest on the debt.

For Tveit and the WCC, debt cancellation would be an important step in the right direction, although not a solution per se.

The international community needs to show moral leadership and make sure that "any financial assistance to rebuild the country comes as grants rather than loans", said Tveit. "And those grants cannot be tied to the detrimental conditions that international financial organizations tend to impose on poor countries", he added.

"This is not just about helping Haiti", said Tveit, "but about empowering and working with its people towards a sustainable society, one that is based on justice".