

Africans Reach Out In Solidarity With Haiti

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A woman walking through the rubble in downtown Port au Prince, shortly after the earthquake: Though Africa is beset with numerous problems of its own; many countries have rushed aid to the stricken people of Haiti.

Photograph: UN / Marco Dormino

In the broad international mobilization to help the stricken people of Haiti, Africa is not lagging behind. Government officials, religious leaders, students, artists and many other Africans responded to the news of the devastating earthquake of 12 January with an immediate outpouring of support and solidarity. They sent messages of condolence and compassion and donated money and goods.

By early February, some 21 countries in Africa had either donated or pledged more than \$51 mn for Haitian relief efforts, according to available reports. That was just a tiny fraction of the total of \$2 bn given or promised worldwide, but notable nonetheless for the continent with the world's highest poverty rates.

Historically, Africans have had a particular affinity for Haiti, a country populated almost entirely by descendants of African slaves. "We are giving our support to the Haitian people, an African people, a black people," said Oumar Waly Zoumarou, a Senegalese labor union spokesman active in organizing relief efforts.

The First Black Republic

There is also a certain pride. As a coalition of political parties in Burkina Faso pointed out in a solidarity message, Haiti was “the first black republic in the world,” a reference to the revolution that drove out the slave owners and ended French colonial rule in 1802 — more than a century and a half before most of Africa won its own freedom.

There are also more direct connections. Numerous African countries have citizens in Haiti, including with the peacekeepers of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) and with other international organizations.

Citizen Responses

Two days after the disaster, the South African government pledged an initial R1 mn (US\$135,000). But South African companies and charities quickly pledged to mount a much bigger effort. Vodacom, a leading mobile phone provider, promptly financed the dispatch to Haiti of a team of 40 trauma doctors, search-dog units and other specialists from Rescue South Africa to help earthquake victims. South African Minister of International Relations Maite Nkoana Mashabane believes that public contributions will eventually exceed the target of R30 mn (\$4 mn) set for the national campaign.

In other African countries as well, civil society groups have not left the initiative to their governments alone. Kenya’s local Red Cross is coordinating the collection of money, food and other donations from the public. Church groups from the DRC to Burkina Faso are

Some were among the 200,000 people believed to have lost their lives in the earthquake.

Among the biggest governmental contributors in Africa are: Morocco, which pledged some \$33 mn in humanitarian assistance; Ghana, with \$3 mn in emergency relief; the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which has promised \$2.5 mn; and Equatorial Guinea, with a pledge of \$2 mn.

Nigeria, which has a contingent of more than 120 police serving with MINUSTAH, is giving \$1.5 mn worth of humanitarian aid. “As the international community mobilizes in aid of Haiti,” said Vice-

mobilizing contributions from their parishioners. An all-star “Ghana Loves Haiti” benefit concert was held in Accra on 23 January, and a national text messaging campaign has been launched to raise funds from the Ghanaian public.

Coumba Gawlo Seck, a popular Senegalese singer, has proposed that she and other artists record a song in solidarity with Haiti, with all proceeds going to the Haitian people. So far, Baaba Maal of Senegal, Alpha Blondy of Côte d’Ivoire, Papa Wemba of the DRC and Oumou Sangaré of Mali, among others, have agreed to join the effort.

The Senegalese response has been especially multi-sided. Health care and social work unions are collecting medicines and new clothes to send to Haiti. Teachers’ unions have scheduled a “week of solidarity” with Haiti in February,

President Goodluck Jonathan, “it can count on Nigeria’s support.”

Jean Ping, chairperson of the Commission of the African Union, the continent’s political body, urged all AU member states to provide assistance. Algeria, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Namibia, Senegal and Tunisia have each donated \$1 mn so far, and other countries are gearing up their own efforts. Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade in addition offered fertile land to any Haitians who wished to be “repatriated” to Africa.

to mobilize support among teachers, students and parents.

The Comité d’initiative Sénégal-Haïti, set up by Senegalese and Caribbean residents living in Senegal, argues for a longer-term perspective that looks beyond emergency relief to the enormous tasks of rebuilding Haiti. Through broad public campaigns and more focused initiatives in individual schools and workplaces, the committee aims to raise funds for an initial period of at least three months.

Some committee members have proposed organizing scholarships for Haitian students. “Many Haitians came to teach in African countries,” Professor Boubacar Barry of Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar told a Senegalese reporter. Therefore, “Africa owes a debt to Haiti.”

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