

The Lesson of Haiti

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TWO days ago, at almost six o'clock in the evening Cuban time and when, given its geographical location, night had already fallen in Haiti, television stations began to broadcast the news that a violent earthquake – measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale – had severely struck Port-au-Prince. The seismic phenomenon originated from a tectonic fault located in the sea just 15 kilometers from the Haitian capital, a city where 80% of the population inhabit fragile homes built of adobe and mud.

The news continued almost without interruption for hours. There was no footage, but it was confirmed that many public buildings, hospitals, schools and more solidly-constructed facilities were reported collapsed. I have read that an earthquake of the magnitude of 7.3 is equivalent to the energy released by an explosion of 400,000 tons of TNT.

Tragic descriptions were transmitted. Wounded people in the streets were crying out for medical help, surrounded by ruins under which their relatives were buried. No one, however, was able to broadcast a single image for several hours.

The news took all of us by surprise. Many of us have frequently heard about hurricanes and severe flooding in Haiti, but were not aware of the fact that this neighboring country ran the risk of a massive earthquake. It has come to light on this occasion that 200 years ago, a massive earthquake similarly affected this city, which would have been the home of just a few thousand inhabitants at that time.

At midnight, there was still no mention of an approximate figure in terms of victims. High-ranking United Nations officials and several heads of government discussed the moving events and announced that they would send emergency brigades to help. Given that MINUSTAH (United Stabilization Mission in Haiti) troops are deployed there – UN forces from various countries – some defense ministers were talking about possible casualties among their personnel.

It was only yesterday, Wednesday morning, when the sad news began to arrive of enormous human losses among the population, and even institutions such as the United Nations mentioned that some of their buildings in that country had collapsed, a word that does not say anything in itself but could mean a lot.

For hours, increasingly more traumatic news continued to arrive about the situation in this sister nation. Figures related to the number of fatal victims were discussed, which fluctuated, according to various versions, between 30,000 and 100,000. The images are devastating; it is evident that the catastrophic event has been given widespread coverage around the world, and many governments, sincerely moved by the disaster, are making efforts to cooperate according to their resources.

The tragedy has genuinely moved a significant number of people, particularly those in which that quality is innate. But perhaps very few of them have stopped to consider why Haiti is such a poor country. Why does almost 50% of its population depend on family remittances sent from abroad? Why not analyze the realities that led Haiti to its current situation and this enormous suffering as well?

The most curious aspect of this story is that no one has said a single word to recall the fact that Haiti was the first country in which 400,000 Africans, enslaved and trafficked by Europeans, rose up against 30,000 white slave masters on the sugar and coffee plantations, thus undertaking the first great social revolution in our hemisphere. Pages of insurmountable glory were written there. Napoleon's most eminent general was defeated there. Haiti is the net product of colonialism and imperialism, of more than one century of the employment of its human resources in the toughest forms of work, of military interventions and the extraction of its natural resources.

This historic oversight would not be so serious if it were not for the real fact that Haiti constitutes the disgrace of our era, in a world where the exploitation and pillage of the vast majority of the planet's inhabitants prevails.

Billions of people in Latin American, Africa and Asia are suffering similar shortages although perhaps not to such a degree as in the case of Haiti.

Situations like that of that country should not exist in any part of the planet, where tens of thousands of cities and towns abound in similar or worse conditions, by virtue of an unjust international economic and political order imposed on the world. The world population is not only threatened by natural disasters such as that of Haiti, which is a just a pallid shadow of what could take place in the planet as a result of climate change, which really was the object of ridicule, derision, and deception in Copenhagen.

It is only just to say to all the countries and institutions that have lost citizens or personnel because of the natural disaster in Haiti: we do not doubt that in this case, the greatest effort will be made to save human lives and alleviate the pain of this long-suffering people. We cannot blame them for the natural phenomenon that has taken place there, even if we do not agree with the policy adopted with Haiti.

But I have to express the opinion that it is now time to look for real and lasting solutions for that sister nation.

In the field of healthcare and other areas, Cuba – despite being a poor and blockaded country – has been cooperating with the Haitian people for many years. Around 400 doctors and healthcare experts are offering their services free of charge to the Haitian people. Our doctors are working every day in 227 of the country's 337 communes. On the other hand, at least 400 young Haitians have trained as doctors in our homeland. They will now work with the reinforcement brigade which traveled there yesterday to save lives in this critical situation. Thus, without any special effort being made, up to 1,000 doctors and healthcare experts can be mobilized, almost all of whom are already there willing to cooperate with any other state that wishes to save the lives of the Haitian people and rehabilitate the injured.

Another significant number of young Haitians are currently studying medicine in Cuba.

We are also cooperating with the Haitian people in other areas within our reach. However,

there can be no other form of cooperation worthy of being described as such than fighting in the field of ideas and political action in order to put an end to the limitless tragedy suffered by a large number of nations such as Haiti.

The head of our medical brigade reported: "The situation is difficult, but we have already started saving lives." He made that statement in a succinct message hours after his arrival yesterday in Port-au-Prince with additional medical reinforcements.

Later that night, he reported that Cuban doctors and ELAM's Haitian graduates were being deployed throughout the country. They had already seen more than 1,000 patients in Port-au-Prince, immediately establishing and putting into operation a hospital that had not collapsed and using field hospitals where necessary. They were preparing to swiftly set up other centers for emergency care.

We feel a wholesome pride for the cooperation that, in these tragic instances, Cuba doctors and young Haitian doctors who trained in Cuba are offering our brothers and sisters in Haiti!

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