

# Relief for Haiti requires bold initiative

On a good day, Haitians have a tough life. In a country of 9 million people, where an estimated 90 percent live in poverty, life is gritty. About a fifth of the population lives in Port-au-Prince, the nation's capital, and the surrounding area.

If, as some estimates project, the death toll climbs to more than 200,000, the area will literally be decimated, meaning that a tenth of the residents of the region will have died in the Jan. 12 earthquake and its aftermath.

Consider for a moment how that would compare here; it's not really so far off. Maryland and Haiti are about the same size, geographically. Baltimore City has about 700,000 residents, and the metro area has about 2.7 million. Port-au-Prince has about 1 million residents, with another million or so in the area (an exact count is hard to come by). Maryland has 5.7 million residents; Haiti has 9 million.

Now imagine that a disaster hit somewhere near the Inner Harbor; buildings collapsed throughout the city and about a quarter-million people died within a week. That's the scope of pain and devastation Haiti is coping with right now.

But it's worse.

You think it's crowded here, and that traffic is bad? Port-au-Prince's population is 10 times denser than Baltimore's, and even our most-pothole-ridden street or highway would seem like a smooth thoroughfare to the folks in Haiti.

And now, any semblance of normal life there has been disrupted by a magnitude 7 earthquake. The streets are blocked with debris, and what sanitation infrastructure was available has been compromised.

We saw after Hurricane Katrina that even if a disaster occurs in the United States, it can be difficult to deliver aid over land. In assisting Haiti, all emergency aid and later development assistance must be delivered by ship or air, and that makes recovery much more complex.

Five years ago, I visited Haiti a few weeks after Tropical Storm (later Hurricane) Jeanne ripped through the island, killing more than 3,000. Touring the ravaged areas with Catholic Relief Services, I saw firsthand how those who had nothing to begin with coped after such a disaster. CRS and the U.S. Agency for International Development, CARE and other organizations provided as much assistance as they could, but no huge global outpouring of support came for the island. Four consecutive hurricanes hit the island of Hispaniola - Haiti and Dominican Republic - in 2008, causing 800 deaths and more damage. Again, the world did not come to Haitians' aid.

Now this. The world has awoken to the plight of Haiti. Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, chairman of the board of CRS, said he was in Rome when he heard the news, and went to St. Peter's to pray before the Pietà, Michelangelo's masterpiece of Mary cradling the lifeless body of Our Lord after his crucifixion. "Haiti is the broken, bloody body of Jesus in the arms of the blessed Mother, crying out to the world now for aid and assistance," the archbishop said.

Now we must deal with this situation, and it may be an opportunity for all the world to make Haiti whole. It may be a chance to start anew and create an entirely new infrastructure for Haiti that is solid and sustainable. The reconstruction work that will come should provide long-term gainful employment for Haitians. It also provides a chance for higher standards for safer buildings that are earthquake and hurricane resistant.

Before now, on a good day, life in Haiti was a challenge. And there will be many more difficult days and years ahead. A bold initiative will be required to rebuild a nation. We must now hope that the world will not forget this devastation a month from now and that the world's prayers and efforts will bring about a brighter future for Haiti's people.

*Christopher Gunty is associate publisher/editor of The Catholic Review.*