

U.S. bishops call for a long-term strategy in Haiti to reduce poverty

WASHINGTON - The United States needs “a long-term coherent strategy for recovery, development and poverty reduction in Haiti,” said the chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on International Justice and Peace in a Jan. 26 letter to officials in the Obama administration.

Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., said the strategy for rebuilding Haiti after the devastation of the Jan. 12 earthquake should combine efforts of U.S. government agencies with groups that have expertise and experience with Haiti.

He sent the letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Ambassador Ron Kirk, U.S. trade representative.

Key elements in rebuilding Haiti, he said, include: debt relief and an expansion of trade; an extension of temporary protected status that has been granted to Haitians living in the United States; and sustained reconstruction and development assistance.

“How our nation responds in the near and long term is a test of who we are as a neighbor,” the bishop said.

He thanked President Barack Obama for his quick response to the disaster by sending relief and the assistance of government agencies and also for listening to an appeal made by the bishops and many others that the U.S. grant Haitians in the U.S. temporary protected status.

But Bishop Hubbard said it was “highly unlikely” that the 18-month duration of the special status “will afford sufficient time for Haiti to be rebuilt in ways that make it safe for Haitians to return to their country and find employment.”

He also noted that the church has responded to the crisis through the work of Catholic Relief Services, its overseas relief and development agency, and special collections by parishes in most U.S. dioceses the weekend after the earthquake and subsequent collections in other dioceses.

But the bishop noted that much more needs to be done.

He quoted a Haitian bishop who said: “At the moment it’s all about the emergency, but one day the questions will be about reconstruction.”

“When the international community and Haitians move beyond the most urgent aspects of the emergency, we urge a substantial and sustained commitment by the U.S. government to provide long-term funding for reconstruction and poverty reduction,” Bishop Hubbard wrote.

He said the bishops approved the U.S. government’s decision “to provide full debt relief and offer grants instead of loans for Haiti’s recovery” and stressed that U.S. leaders should “encourage other governments as well as multilateral institutions to do the same.”

Bishop Hubbard said the cancellation of Haiti’s debt, which amounts to some \$1 billion, “would give Haiti financial relief and enable it to redirect its limited resources to reconstruction and investments in development” and urged U.S. leaders to “take the lead to bring about the debt relief so urgently needed by the Haitian people.”

The bishop stressed that relief efforts also should support and strengthen the role of

the Haitian government and institutions that will require “dependable flows of international assistance that target all sectors of Haiti’s needs, including infrastructure, health care, education, psycho-social support, law enforcement, judiciary, and economic and agricultural development.”

He said it would also be important to expand trade preferences in Haiti, noting that Haitian factories are still limited in what they can produce and export under the U.S. preference program. Allowing the country to expand the number of goods that can be produced and exported, he said, would produce jobs and encourage exporters to rebuild more quickly.

“While implementing a broader preferential treatment for Haitian goods may take some time, it will be an important aspect of the longer-term and sustainable development of Haiti,” he added.