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**And now another zero hour.
Reconstruction and recovery in Haiti**

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And now another zero hour. Reconstruction and recovery in Haiti

Bonn, 12 April 2010. “We’re starting out at zero.” This we heard virtually everywhere in the media in the wake of the devastating earthquake in Haiti. Every disaster offers an opportunity, and Haiti’s chance, the “zero hour” that struck there in January 2010, is now supposed to lead to a new social and economic start for Haiti. That at least seems to be the hope of numerous politicians. Indeed, the Action Plan for National Recovery and Development of Haiti presented on 31 March in New York is buoyed by the idea of a new start. The countries present in New York pledged US \$ 5.3 billion for the first 18 months of reconstruction. However, in Haitian society there is widespread and unconcealed scepticism concerning any such new start. For the big “zero hour,” with its untold possibilities, has been promised time and again in the history of this Caribbean island state. In the past 20 years the country’s political elite and the international community, led by the US and France, have pledged, and not just on one occasion, to do everything better “this time.” We need to think here only of the period of shaky democratic new beginnings between 1994 and 2004, or of the abortive attempts to provide the country support for efforts to boost its socio-economic development.

The dimensions of the quake disaster, which claimed at least 250,000 victims, made close to two million people homeless, and destroyed some 320,000 buildings; make the present situation a truly exceptional one. And yet it would still be wrong to speak of a “zero hour.” True, in many places the quake utterly destroyed the sparse infrastructure the country in fact had. But other structures have survived the quake, structures that, on second glance, prove to be highly relevant for the country’s reconstruction. Those who will be deciding on the country’s future are, at least for the time being, still in power. Entrenched political constellations and a large number of all too well-known problems persist, including massive inequality, widespread poverty, and high unemployment. And in connection with the project of Haitian reconstruction, the concert of international powers engaged in the country continue to manoeuvre for positions of supremacy in the Western Hemisphere.

To cite one example, the loudest brawl, over the leadership of the international mission in Haiti, does not only involve the US and Brazil. But Venezuela, too, is intent on making its voice heard, and it has pledged more than the US in support of the reconstruction effort, namely US \$ 21 billion. Spain, for its part, sees the disaster as an opportunity to strengthen the – at present small – role it plays in the international donor community. The only country still holding back is Haiti’s former colonial power France, which, in 1825, granted the island country its independence in exchange for a payment of 150 million francs – a sum that, adjusted for interest and inflation, today would amount to some US \$ 21 billion. The government of Haiti is, in other words, in danger of being marginalised in this wrangling for pre-eminence.

However, the Action Plan for Recovery does accord the government of Haiti a prominent role. It is, as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon put it, to be in the “driver’s seat” in a “Haitian-led” reconstruction effort. Haiti’s future development can of course prove successful only – and there is absolutely no doubt about this – if recovery and reconstruction are “Haitian-led,” with the population assuming responsibility and ownership for its own future. However, a Haitian population represented by a government apparatus that is seen more as part of the problem than as part of a possible solution is not a scenario that offers much in the way of promising prospects.



Even though President Préval enjoys considerable popularity among the international community, he had, even before the earthquake struck, lost a large measure of the support he once enjoyed among the Haitian population. Many people are disappointed over the president's lack of vigour and commitment when it comes to forging ahead with necessary – and promised – reforms. This criticism focuses above all on the deep cleavage that can be seen dividing Haitian society, and that is leading to the entrenchment of a two-class structure. Nearly three quarters of the population is poor, forced to live from less than two US \$ per day. Many of these people are farmers who expected the new government to provide them more land and to improve living conditions. Their demands have a long tradition in Haitian history, and they are rooted in decades of systematic exclusion by the Haitian state, with, for instance, farmers being accorded fewer civil rights than others. The farming population sees itself face to face with a small economic and political elite that runs the affairs of state in the interest of its own well-being. The country's political forces are gridlocked along this cleavage between poor and rich. The Préval government is, for instance, accused of setting up obstacles to the participation of the opposition in elections, seeking in this way to choke off political competition. Disappointment with Préval has continued to mount since the earthquake, in part because the president waited two weeks before addressing the people of Haiti. He in this way confirmed what the majority in any case thinks, namely that the government of Haiti is not working for the public welfare and has proven incapable of effectively tackling national problems.

And of course, if you are to take the driver's seat, you will need a vehicle – that is, a reliable infrastructure, committed, energetic politicians and administrators, and the backing of the population. The Haitian government, though, lacked all this even before the quake struck. If the present disaster is now to prove to be an opportunity, the international community will, in the first place, have no choice but to call on the Haitian government to initiate a process of national dialogue aimed at overcoming the deep cleavage running through Haitian society and developing an inclusive vision for a future Haitian society. In the second place, measures need to be put in place to ensure that the aid made available to the country is used transparently, with a view to avoiding cases of misuse of humanitarian aid of the kind observed in Central America in the wake of Hurricane Mitch. The planned Haitian Interim Reconstruction Commission, set to be made up of representatives of the donor countries and the Haitian government, will not be sufficient to reach this objective. In view of the way in which power is presently concentrated in the Haitian government, what is needed is a far broader involvement of the Haitian society.



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