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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Lessons from the Haiti Earthquake: Protecting Small States**

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21 January 2010

*The earthquake tragedy in Haiti offers lessons in how the world should prepare well in advance for such non-traditional security threats. Small states should focus on good governance while the international community should exercise rehabilitative soft power.*

WITH A population of 10 million and a territorial size of 27,750 square kilometres, Haiti qualifies as a quintessential small state. It is also representative of a small state that has been repeatedly traumatised by a history of anti-colonial struggle, multiple missteps in domestic governance, and the ravages of tropical storms, floods, hurricanes and earthquakes. The quake that struck on 12 January 2010 should not only call the world's attention to a calamitous death toll in excess of 100,000. It is also a lesson in the omissions of governance as well as in how the international community should invest in building a rapid reaction disaster corps on the same level of priority that one would accord politico-military crises.

It is an intolerable situation that some six days after the quake, the spectacle of public looting, widespread hunger, and unattended dead bodies remained the lot of the Haitian people. It was also telling that many international television news crews were doubling up as both incidental rescuers and recorders of suffering. As a result, Haiti's suffering cruelly dramatised the old adage of bystanders twiddling their thumbs while a crisis unfolded in a faraway location. While the ground realities of delivering relief may be more complex than what the images suggest, the ongoing tragedy serves as a timely wake-up call for a collaborative demonstration of rehabilitative soft power from states of all sizes and ideologies.

### **Vulnerability and Domestic Governance**

For nearly four decades, the small state lobby in the Commonwealth had articulated the profile of trauma for small states. Size did matter to the nature of government and internal political dissension. When various groups across the political spectrum cannot cooperate, and ordinary citizens are socially atomised, a civil war will wind a bloody path with mounting casualties within a confined territory.

Likewise, size matters when non-traditional security threats posed by Mother Nature in the form of earthquakes and hurricanes strike.

The lack of strategic depth for the population's refuge, or for the dissipation of the oncoming forces of nature, produces an equally horrendous outcome for the population. The Commonwealth reports by the small state lobby have consistently argued for both the international community as well as small state populations to foster good governance to mitigate crises when they occur. The scale of Haiti's destruction should not obscure the equally important drama of the political vacuum precipitated by the utter breakdown of law and order. Reports filed by various international news agencies confirmed that the survivors of the quake had to confront the uncertainties of food delivery, the absence of a central information clearing authority, and the visible absence of police forces.

A few voices blamed the Haitian president, Rene Preval, for being non-existent during his people's hour of need. Concurrently, it was the US military that served as *de facto* government by securing the airport for aid deliveries that, in any case, quickly generated into bottlenecks without pre-existing organisations in place to distribute the materiel efficiently. The sceptic might object that the scale of the disaster was simply overwhelming for any aid effort to cope. But it must surely be acknowledged that small states must prepare organisationally for the contingency of disaster in confined spaces. A rehearsed civil defence plan is indispensable as a first line of defence for any small state.

### **Soft Power of the Aid Givers**

Small states, as last December's inconclusive environmental summit in Copenhagen has shown, must still rely in great measure on the magnanimity of the rest of the international community in tackling humanitarian crises arising from natural disasters. One spokesperson of the Alliance of Small Island States had tellingly commented that nobody in their right mind would want to leave their homeland as 'environmental refugees'. This was not just a technical point but also an emotional one. The nation-states that enjoy large strategic depth in relative terms ought to practise empathy towards their territorially less well-endowed brethren. This is because of the fact of natural geographic interdependence.

An earthquake can generate *tsunamis* that spiral in all directions from the epicentre. No territorial boundary within range of nature's wrath will be spared. Additionally, seismologists will point out that the tectonic plate boundaries recognise neither ideology nor hard power superiority; tectonic plates shift according to the logic of subterranean magma flows on a common planet. In these ways, it is laudable that countries as diverse as China, South Korea, Japan, Australia and the United States have been among the first to dispatch recovery and humanitarian teams to Haiti.

The Asian response is particularly heartening given that emerging great power rivals could easily channel their new status into acts of international kindness that will do far more for their public standing than nuclear programmes. Aid giving in the name of a common humanity is also the concrete manifestation of practical idealism in action. Interestingly, this is something that Singapore subscribes to as a pillar of its foreign policy of being a good international citizen.

### **Helping Oneself, Helping Others**

In time to come, when one reflects upon the lessons of the dreadful Haiti earthquake of January 2010, the latter will contain kernels of wisdom about how a small state needs to prepare to help itself, in anticipation of constructively utilising the outstretched hand offered by the international community. The physically unaffected members of the international community should also embrace within their respective national security visions a solemn declaration that humanitarian disasters caused by Mother Nature cannot allow power politics to get in the way of the spirit of global charity.

One country's fate could well be another's in the future. Yes, we must all bow in silence before those who lost their lives in Haiti, but also in recognition that Mother Nature recognises no boundaries when she unleashes her fury.

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