

# A COMPASSIONATE AND COMPETENT RESPONSE



Ben Fishman

THE WORK USAID AND STATE HAVE DONE IN HAITI AFTER THE JAN. 12 EARTHQUAKE SHOWS WHY THEY SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD IN DISASTER RESPONSE.

*By J. BRIAN ATWOOD*

The American people's humanitarian instincts rise to the occasion whenever disasters strike, whether here or anywhere in the world. Americans expect their government to act with dispatch, efficiency and compassion. When that happens, as it did in the response to the earthquake in Haiti, there is an added bonus: the world gains an appreciation for our values and for the competence of our government.

A high-ranking official of the last administration recently described an encounter with a long-serving foreign minister

from a Middle Eastern country. Told that the minister wanted to convey a serious concern, the diplomat assumed that it must be related to a difference over policy. “No,” the minister said, “whatever policy differences we have had with the United States, there always was a presumption of competence. Your mishandling of the Katrina tragedy has badly tarnished your reputation in this part of the world.”

The challenge our government and the international community faced in Port-au-Prince on Jan. 12 was even greater than that of Hurricane Katrina. Haiti, the poorest nation in our hemisphere, did not possess the support systems of the city of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana or the United States. While 1,863 Americans died in the Katrina disaster, the latest death toll in Haiti is 230,000, and the crisis is not yet over.

The government of Haiti nearly collapsed along with its ministry buildings. The United Nations building came down on its 140 occupants; its director, deputy director and many others were killed. Nongovernmental groups that might have aided in the response were devastated, their staffers and families killed or badly wounded. The new U.S. embassy remained intact, but the staff mourned the loss of one of its own, FSO Victoria DeLong, a cultural affairs officer who died when her home collapsed.

### **DART-ing to the Rescue**

President Barack Obama immediately ordered an “all-government” response and named USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah, confirmed only the week before, coordinator of the effort. Dr. Shah and the entire U.S. government were well served by USAID’s Disaster Assistance Response Team, which immediately deployed to Haiti. Its key elements were in place within 24 hours.

The DART was led by an experienced veteran, Tim Callaghan, director of USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance’s Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean. Callaghan and his Costa Rica-based staff

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have helped governments in the region develop strategies to mitigate the worst effects of natural disasters. He has also advised the United Nations on the development of a search-and-rescue protocol and a certification system for relief units that are deployed by the international community.

Callaghan “pulled in” the two search-and-rescue teams that regularly work with USAID — and are certified by the United Nations as international search teams — from Los Angeles, Calif., and Fairfax, Va. The 17-member DART and 72-member search-and-rescue team (with six canines and 48 tons of equipment) arrived in Port-au-Prince at 4:15 p.m. on Jan. 13. They were saving lives and assessing the desperate needs of Haitians that same evening. A day later, they “called forward” another certified team from Miami-Dade County, Fla.

A disaster of this magnitude, affecting some three million people, is as complex a challenge as any the DART has seen. Moving supplies was nearly impossible until debris-strewn roads could be cleared. The airport, not the most efficient facility even in normal times, had to be repaired and equipped to handle much more traffic. The port was in ruins, which made the import of heavy equipment a challenge. Movement from across the Dominican Republic border was the best option, but this had to be handled sensitively.

The U.S. Southern Command provided crucial logistical support, responding to needs determined by the DART. U.S. Ambassador to Haiti Ken Merten, who immediately declared the situation an emergency, and General Ken Keene of SOUTHCOM comprised the leadership team, along with Callaghan.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, USAID Administrator Shah and Cheryl Mills, Sec. Clinton’s chief of staff, were soon on the ground, Sec. Clinton having returned early from a visit to Asia. She personified the level of attention the tragedy was receiving from the U.S. government.

In such disasters, the media play an important role: that of the messenger/critic. Graphic accounts both encourage generosity and keep pressure on governments to respond. In Haiti, the media presented a special challenge, however; part of their mandate was to report all that was going wrong. And in the early days of a disaster response, there is no shortage of bad news.

The initial news from Haiti focused on inadequate medical facilities, where doctors performed difficult operations

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with no modern equipment or anesthesia. The removal of thousands of bodies, a major sanitation/health risk, was vividly reported, as well. Amid the din of these emotional reports, the underlying question was, “Why can’t the United States and the international community do more?”

Soon the media began to focus on isolated incidents of violence. Store windows broken by marauding, hungry, teenagers, and crowds clamoring behind food trucks were captured by television networks. The images misrepresented the bravery and resolution of the Haitian people, but they constituted news. The Haitian government and the U.S. military soon began to deter the violence, both by being present and by setting up controls at food distribution sites.

Mistakes were made. Some search-and-rescue teams that deployed were not certified for international disaster relief and came without adequate supplies and training.

*USAID’s Disaster Assistance Response Team began operating in Haiti within 24 hours.*

Some teams wandered outside the carefully planned grid system set up by the United Nations to provide help. Others disregarded local authorities and ignored important cultural signals. These teams were well-motivated and they worked very hard in difficult circumstances, but more often than not, they made coordination more challenging.

### **Thinking Outside the Tent**

In contrast, the embassy and DART were highly sensitive to the plight of the Haitian government and respectful of local authority. Dumping food off the back of a truck was a recipe for chaos, and they knew that food distribution would be more orderly if they worked with local leaders. They realized that they had to “think outside the tent,” providing temporary shelters for the displaced, reuniting families or finding stable structures in which to house people.

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Mindful that the next big threat would come from sanitation-related causes, the team is using skilled sanitation and shelter experts to prepare the community for the coming rainy season.

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives, established during the Clinton administration to find ways to reconcile disrupted, traumatized societies, also went to work in Haiti early on to help the government re-establish itself. For instance, OTI set up a facility where President Rene Preval could hold press conferences and address his traumatized population. And it continues to play that role in Haiti.

Embassy Port-au-Prince was augmented by consular officers from around the world who worked tirelessly to process the evacuation of American citizens back to the States. Consular officer Paul Mayer, on loan from Montreal, described the lines of thousands who stood outside the U.S. embassy, and the sad duty to say "no" to the unqualified cases. Writing in the State Department blog, he said, "The Foreign Affairs Manual explains things in precise detail. The FAM, however, doesn't prepare you for the feeling you get from saying 'No,' and 'I'm sorry,' over and over."

Mayer and his colleagues also tried to ease the discomfort of people standing for hours in the tropical heat. They distributed bottles of water and candy bars, and aided those who fell ill. They did all they could, but will no doubt long be haunted by what they witnessed.

The embassy also had to tend to American groups who came to "do good" by taking children back to the United States. One group of 10 from Idaho made international news when they were arrested trying to cross into the Dominican Republic with Haitian children. This, and other acts by seemingly well-intentioned people, cost time and effort that should have been devoted to providing relief.

The outpouring of emotion and resources from the American population was a reflection of our nation's humanitarian impulse. Ideally, this translates into useful support for mainstream aid organizations through the fungible commodity the professionals can make the best use of: money. There may still be warehouses full of clothing and dated medicines from past disasters that never did find their way to people in distress. Heading off this misplaced assistance becomes part of the government's public relations challenge.

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### **Lessons to Be Learned**

The Haiti story retreated from the front pages, succeeded by news of the even more severe Feb. 28 earthquake in Chile. The story is far from over, however. There are still lives to save and a nation to rebuild.

When the full story is told, there will be individual heroes and heroines in addition to effective, highly professional teams — as well as groups of well-intentioned, but unprepared people. So there are lessons to be learned from this "all-government response."

Perhaps the most positive lesson is that the "3Ds" — diplomacy, development and defense, shorthand for State, USAID and DOD — worked well and in concert. This was a good test for a more integrated effort in post-conflict environments where each of the departments has a vital role to play.

USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance had the lead in Haiti, as was appropriate, and performed well. The embassy and USAID mission supported the team with local knowledge and dedication. When the DART leaves the scene, our State Department and USAID Foreign Service officers will carry forward the effort to help Haiti rebuild its government, its civil society and its infrastructure.

In the early days of the crisis, critical voices asked why USAID was put in charge of the response. Why not the military? Or the Federal Emergency Management Agency? The answer should be clear to anyone who studies this crisis carefully. An objective analysis will lead to the conclusion that future "all-government responses" should be limited to those organizations trained and certified to do this work internationally.

State and USAID demonstrated in Haiti why they should take the lead in disaster response. Military units are essential, but they operate best under broad direction from trained humanitarian professionals. In this case, they received that guidance from an exceptional USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team.

Above all, despite daunting challenges, our government will emerge from the Haiti crisis having made a vital humanitarian contribution. The compassion of our people and the competence of our government were on display for the entire world to see. ■