

## Haiti: the US and Military Aid in Times of Natural Disaster (ARI)

*Carlota García Encina\**

**Theme:** This paper analyses the US military deployment in Haiti after the earthquake of 12 January, which caused catastrophic damage in the poorest country in the Americas.

**Summary:** At Haiti's request, the US took the lead in directing rescue operations and coordinating an aid campaign with the United Nations and the international community. The US also had its own reasons for coming to the rescue of the Haitian people. However, its military deployment has not been without criticism inside and outside the region.

**Analysis:** The catastrophe caused by the powerful earthquake that hit Haiti in January was the first major humanitarian crisis that Barack Obama has faced as President. He responded by mobilising resources and personnel in a race against time, eventually making it one of the largest US mobilisations for dealing with a natural disaster. The entire government took part, led by USAID (United States Agency for International Development), in an effort that Obama himself described as a successor to the Cold War policies that followed World War II.

US military forces were to play a critical role, especially in the first days after the earthquake, supplying medical services and food for the Haitian people. To do this, they took control of key locations such as the airport in Port-au-Prince, the main entry point for aid. Furthermore, former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush sought to assume leadership as the public image of international aid efforts and a reference point for attracting urgently needed resources from all over the world.

From a humanitarian standpoint, Obama had to make this effort. The institutional and economic vacuum created by the earthquake and the urgent need to help the people of Haiti required US leadership. Strategically, Haiti's proximity to the US and the US role in the region accentuated this need. To not act would complicate things for the Haitians and force many of them to seek refuge in the US. Finally, from a security standpoint, it was necessary to reinforce the presence of the United Nations, which had been in Haiti for years but could not cope with the consequences of the earthquake on its own.

Obama's response was also a way to showcase American values at a time when anti-US sentiment is rampant around the world, a phenomenon the White House sees as a strategic threat. Diplomatically and politically, the US's direct commitment would help restore its credibility and legitimacy as a force for good both in the Americas and at the international level.

---

\* *Research assistant, Elcano Royal Institute.*

Obama's commitment to Haiti was reflected on the front page of newspapers around the world, which showed US Marines in the role of humanitarian workers, distributing food to the Haitian people. It was not the first time this had happened. After the tsunami that devastated South-East Asia in December 2004, Washington ordered a mobilisation that, in contrast with the growing anti-Americanism that followed the start of the Iraq war in 2003, significantly improved the image of the US in Muslim countries: the proportion of Indonesians who had a favourable image of the US grew from 15% to 44% and those with a negative image declined from 48% to 13%, while those who opposed the US war on terrorism dropped from 72% to 36%.

The US government sought a repeat of this by sending aid to Pakistan after it was struck by an earthquake in October 2005, and to Myanmar after a cyclone hit in May 2008. These actions were an expression of humanitarian concern, but they would also have political repercussions. In the case of Myanmar, when the ruling military junta rejected US assistance, the Defense Secretary Robert Gates hurriedly insisted that more people would die unless the regime changed its mind and removed obstacles blocking the arrival of aid. As for the earthquake in Pakistan, before the catastrophe only 23% of Pakistanis had a positive opinion of the US, while after receiving aid the percentage went up to 46%. Here, too, the US reaped dividends by improving its image.

After the earthquake in Pakistan, Robert Kaplan, an expert in military affairs, said that despite misgivings both inside and outside the US about the presence of American soldiers around the world, over time more and more would be seen. But they will be involved in operations more related to natural disasters than terrorism: 'Because of our ability to deploy rapidly to a territory and set up a security perimeter, we are becoming the largest emergency aid organization'.

For years now, natural disasters have been part of the range of threats the US has to address. And this is part of official US military strategy, although it must be noted that the aid process that follows a catastrophe is an inter-agency effort. Military aid in cases of natural disasters now appears for the first time in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) of 2006, which stresses its growing importance for the American military. That review also stated that it was in the US's national security interest to back up governments that are at a clear disadvantage in confronting earthquakes, hurricanes or other phenomena of this kind, through cooperation and joint exercises. A year after the QDR 2006 came out, Gates and Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, elevated disaster relief efforts into the category of the six main capabilities described in the Navy's strategy for 2007 (*A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*). That document reformulated the Navy's strategic goals for the first time since 1982. Gates said these efforts, besides being an effective tool for fighting against anti-Americanism and radical ideologies, were part of an idea he began to use and develop: smart power, which was a combination of soft power and hard power. 'I am here to strengthen our capabilities using soft power and integrating it in the best way possible with hard power', he said in 2007. The idea of smart power was later taken up by Obama himself and his Secretary of State. It is a concept that is leading the US to try to reinforce its civil capabilities as a critical part of foreign policy and national security strategy. It is also leading US military forces to carry out more and more operations like the one it is conducting in Haiti.

This position embraced by Gates had a direct effect on SOUTHCOM (United States Southern Command), whose area of interest is Latin America and the Caribbean. This command has developed its traditional responsibilities so they are now more geared

towards humanitarian missions rather than defensive military operations. A good example of this is the fact that SOUTHCOM has participated in 14 humanitarian relief operations in Latin America and the Caribbean since 2005. Admiral James G. Staviridis –commander of SOUTHCOM from October 2006 to the end of 2009– was the one who gave shape at SOUTHCOM to Gates’s ‘smart power’ by institutionalising humanitarian and relief missions after natural disasters. And he did this precisely in a region where the US military presence has always raised suspicion, sometimes shaping relations between Washington and the southern hemisphere.

In April 2008, Staviridis also reactivated the 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet under the command of SOUTHCOM with the specific purpose of responding to natural disasters, carrying out humanitarian and medical aid missions, fighting drug trafficking and cooperating on environmental and technology issues. The formation has no offensive capacity, or an aircraft carrier or any warships, and its largest vessel is a hospital ship, according to Thomas Shannon, then the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemispheric Affairs. However, its reactivation still drew criticism from some Latin American governments.

SOUTHCOM sponsors preparatory exercises, seminars and conferences to enhance reaction capability and cooperation between armies and institutions in order to respond to natural disasters quickly and efficiently. It has also supported the construction and upgrading of three Emergency Operations Centres and 13 Disaster Assistance Centres. A good example of this are disaster prevention exercises such as FAHUM, or Humanitarian Allied Force, and Trade Wings, which are limited strictly to the Caribbean. Furthermore, the hospital ship USNS Comfort, which deployed to Haiti after the earthquake in January 2010, had already visited that country in April 2009 as the first stop in a four-month humanitarian relief mission throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. The mission was called *Continuing Promise 2009*. And, in September 2008, US troops went to Haiti after a series of hurricanes that caused flooding and landslides.

The US is not the only country that uses the tools of hard power to provide aid to victims of natural disasters outside its borders. In Asia, a continent hit by several natural disasters in recent years, India, Japan and to a lesser extent China have eased the regional perception that existed towards them by making humanitarian assistance one of the main activities of their military forces in their areas of influence. The Canadians themselves have said their military presence in Haiti after the recent earthquake is a show of smart power. The Chinese have even sent personnel to Haiti. Oddly, they were the first to arrive with a search and rescue team. They beat the Americans by a couple of hours.

### *Criticism*

So it was only to be expected that US aid would arrive in Haiti after the quake. But despite the US record with this kind of aid and the urgency of the situation, when Obama launched the operation, including assistance from the military, not everyone was happy. The presence of US Marines caused alarm, especially among some Latin American countries, and triggered wariness among some Western powers that were not able to react with the same decisiveness. Criticism revealed the sensitivity there is over the presence of American soldiers in a Caribbean country where they had already intervened in the past. However, some of the US troops sent to Haiti in the latest operation complained that UN Forces, deployed since 2004 as part of the mission known as MINUSTAH, had left a bad reputation for people in uniform.

The Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez wasted no time in criticising the American deployment, accusing Washington of a covert military occupation of Haiti. He went so far as to say that the US might have triggered the earthquake with military tests of 'tectonic weapons' linked to an initiative called HAARP (High Frequency Auroral Research Program), that is being tried out in Alaska and that to study the possibility of controlling the upper layers of the atmosphere with powerful beams of converging radio waves. Chávez's assertion turned out to be totally absurd.

Criticism also came from Bolivia, Cuba and Nicaragua, all of which are under the influence of Venezuela. Ecuador, however, distanced itself from these statements. It said it was pointless to argue over the arrival of American troops in Haiti, saying 'the more aid the better'.

The Chilean Ambassador in Port-au-Prince also criticised what he called the excessive show and unnecessary aggressiveness of American troops. As an example he cited the US troops' control of the airport, which gave priority to its planes over those of other countries.

The French Secretary of State for Cooperation, Alain Joyandet, said the UN should specify the role of the US in the aid campaign for Haiti because 'it is not about occupying the country, but rather helping it to get back on its feet'. Several NGOs also criticised the massive US military presence, especially for occupying strategic Haitian military facilities that were still severely damaged and for hindering the arrival of aid. Criticism also came from Italy through the civil protection chief there, who called the Haiti operation well-meaning but inefficient and unrealistic.

In the face of so much criticism, the Defense Secretary and the Secretary of State had to come forward and clarify what kind of work the US troops were doing in Haiti. They insisted they went there at the request of the Haitian people.

When the quake hit there were already some 9,000 UN peacekeepers in Haiti, and naturally they were the first to respond to the disaster, as the Haitian government was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the tragedy. However, the response of the UN troops, who were also very weakened, was quite limited during the first 72 hours. Edmond Mulet, acting Director of the UN mission, acknowledged that he could not cope with the disaster, so the presence of American troops was welcome. The UN mission was able to increase its activity only after the Americans deployed and established a supply chain for food and medicine. On 21 January, the UN and the US signed an agreement that normalised the role of the US troops.

The criticism has practically died out and the US has reduced its deployment back to the initial level of 13,000. It had got as high as 20,000.

#### *The Military Effort*

Although aid from the US was to be expected, the proportion of military resources brought into play could in fact have surprised because of its size. Obama ordered a military deployment of historic proportions even though he knew it would bring pressure on military forces and a defence budget that were already stretched to the limit. For Haiti, Washington was prepared to push.

Some warned that the size of the mobilisation the government wanted to carry out would involve an extra burden for the military, already deployed on two fronts for the past eight years: 180,000 US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan plus a further 30,000 as part of Washington's new strategy for Afghanistan. Despite some warnings, the Pentagon had to show flexibility in order to find the resources required by Obama to come to Haiti's aid.

In the first days of the crisis the US deployed around 13,000 troops to take part in an operation Unified Response. They included members of the 2nd Brigade and 3rd Battalion of the US Army's 82nd Airborne Division, which comprised some 3,000 troops, as a quick reaction force, and more than 2,200 Marines. Completing the mission were the ships Bataan, Carter Hall and Fort McHenry, which make up an Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), the transport ship Gunston Hall, the aircraft carrier Carl Vinson and the hospital ship Comfort.

On January 17, Obama called up reservists to take part in the operation. The order involved deploying a Coast Guard unit and would allow troop rotations, especially medical personnel aboard the hospital ship USNS Comfort.

The 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit and the Nassau Amphibious Ready Group arrived on 23 January in Haiti, where 13,000 American soldiers were already deployed. The group included heavy Ch-53 helicopters, an MV-22 Osprey hybrid aircraft, an infantry battalion of nearly 1,200 troops and various units able to carry out medical or transport missions.

The 24<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit and the 2nd combat brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division had completed their counter-insurgency training and were waiting to be called up for deployment in Afghanistan. But it was decided to send them to Haiti for urgent humanitarian relief work. As for the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, some 1,600 troops stationed on the ARG Bataan, they had returned from Iraq just a month earlier.

The aircraft carrier Carl Vinson was also diverted from its original mission – to go from the East Coast of the US to the port of San Diego, California, sailing along the entire coast of Latin America – to head instead to Port-au-Prince. On board it carried 19 helicopters with the task of transporting supplies, water and injured people. Some said that in doing this the US had exhausted its reserves. General David Petraeus, commander of CENTCOM (US Central Command) had to deny suggestions that the deployment in Haiti had had consequences for the new deployments to Afghanistan. The military effort in Haiti also coincided with the release of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) for 2010 – a long-term defence plan – and the defence budget for this year. The QDR once again stressed the provision of military aid in case of natural disasters, and the idea of facing threats of several kinds, all with a gradual reduction in military capability in line with the Pentagon budget. This further strengthened the idea that the operation in Haiti was stretching the US military to the limit.

**Conclusion:** The US military deployment in Haiti has demonstrated something besides the vast response capability the US has. For now it has silenced criticism to the effect that the US has been neglecting its ties with the southern hemisphere, with which it maintains a special relationship that blends history, trade, geographic proximity, migratory flows and shared security problems. These ties are especially relevant in the case of Haiti. To do this, Washington gave another burden to its armed forces, which already have their hands full in Afghanistan and Iraq. But the US had plenty of reasons to act in Haiti: humanitarian, national security and diplomatic ones. The US cooperated in the work of Latin American



countries, such as Brazil, and worked with the government of Cuba to authorise medevac flights through Cuban airspace from the US military base at Guantanamo Bay to Miami. This shows that ties between Washington and Latin America work if both sides do their part.

Charges that the US was trying to occupy Haiti militarily did not gain widespread support and gradually died out, while the US maintained its presence in Haiti under the leadership of the UN. A few weeks after the US operation was launched there were as many as 20,000 US troops in Haiti. Later, it gradually scaled back its first medical-assistance, humanitarian and security mission, mainly after completing in late February the massive distribution of food as established by the World Food Program. On 1 February the US Air Force started working with Haitian air traffic controllers to let them gradually resume management of the airport at Port-au-Prince. Also, the medical situation on the ground has improved, so fewer American health care personnel are needed.

There are still around 9,000 US troops in Haiti –6,000 on the ground and 3,000 on ships—. They have the task of providing protection, building settlements, removing debris and continuing to ensure the distribution of aid. They continue to work with the UN and the international community and local officials, but have given up responsibilities as NGOs and international relief agencies take on more commitments.

How long will these troops stay on the ground? It is still early to say how many will be needed on the ground while the capabilities of the port, airport and government continue to grow. Once the country is stabilised, an international reconstruction force will be needed, with a constant and coherent commitment. At the recent summit in Montreal, the international community pledged to stay in Haiti for at least a decade, which is the time estimated as necessary to rebuild the poorest country in Latin America, although some experts say it will take much longer. Another conference is scheduled to be held in New York and led by the US, which will maintain its commitment to Haiti as long as necessary.

*Carlota García Encina*  
*Research assistant, Elcano Royal Institute*