

HELPING HAITIANS

Heartbreak has again blanketed Haiti along with anarchy. Some contend that by body count alone they have endured the largest natural disaster in human history. That says something. Can I help? Me? Tiny me? In front of the largest disaster ever? The short answer? No. But for a long answer, Yes. But to ensure your help gets to where they need it, you need to understand some things.

The long answer involves you in Haiti, its people, its history. Without your thinking you may cause more harm than good. Taking the family to a meal and a movie will increase the world's reservoir of goodness and order, while throwing those same bucks into the NGO (Non Governmental Organizations) or GO collection buckets, let alone those of outright scam artists, may increase its entropy.

Haitians have a penchant for screwing up the world's third oldest republic. Haiti declared independence in 1804 with a flag made from tearing the white out of the French flag. In 1805 they wrote a constitution despotic toward the conduct of its citizens, and racial in that "No whiteman of whatever nation he may be, shall put his foot on this territory with the title of master or proprietor, neither shall he in future acquire any property . . .".

They intended to create an African culture in the West, and they did. They have freely governed themselves longer than any nation in the hemisphere but the USA. After independence Haiti initiated a 23 year reign of terror on their sparsely settled neighbor, the Dominican Republic (DR).

A practically impenetrable natural border separates Haiti from the DR. A twenty mile swath of either desert or Haitises, jagged jungle hillocks, has kept the terrain either side of the frontier basically unoccupied through the centuries. The inhabitants of Haiti have African cultural roots, and live in an overpopulated and deforested land, while Dominicans have an Hispanic culture and live in lush and bountiful valleys among forested mountains.

The DR has the same population as Haiti, but it takes two-thirds of the island. Haiti lies west of the tallest mountains in the Caribbean Basin, so they catch less condensation from the trade winds than does the DR. In addition, the unfettered foraging of wood for fuel has left Haiti denuded of trees. The law prohibits cutting any tree in the DR and they jealously enforce it. Trees prevent mud slides. Trees bring clouds which bring rain which bring crops to feed people of the countryside. Haiti gets lots of mudslides in hurricane season. Unschooled hungry country folk cluster in the cities for handouts from revolving populist presidents who command by force of armed gangs.

The DR freed itself from Haitian domination in 1844, and with the help of a constitution modeled after the U.S.', went on to prosper with a democratic system. In other words, like the U.S., a system whereby the citizen gets to vote for his own gangsters, if the other guy's gangsters haven't already stolen the ballot boxes. But nonetheless, a system in which entrepreneurship thrives, and thus the country thrives as well, or at least better than many others in Latin America.

While poor, the DR looks wealthy compared to Haiti, the poorest in the hemisphere. In Haiti you see Dominican tourists, but in the DR you see Haitian migrant workers who get dragged back and forth on retired American school buses. Army roadblocks in the western end of the DR search for Haitians smuggling themselves in. With the recent anarchy in Haiti, a million or more Haitians — some with papers — live and work in the DR. Haitian gangs steal children and rent them to beg on Dominican streets. Haitian prostitutes throw their newborns into Dominican landfills.

And both countries suffer from Venezuelan-Mexican-Russian gang wars raging since Hispaniola became a prime drug bridge to the USA.

However, unlike Latin Americans who blame all their self-inflicted ills on the CIA or U.S. 'invasions', Haitians cheerfully admit that they screw up without outside assistance. You won't find Haitians blaming you for their plight. You shall find them eager to share your resources, however, and squander them as they do their own.

In a lifetime of world travel I have met few people as sweet and pacific as the individual Haitian. But collectively they can form a lynch mob faster than the legendary folk of The Old West or throngs from the teeming slums of Asia. As one of only two white men in the region, I spent several pleasant days afoot in a Haitian city of two million during the complete anarchy between Managat and Aristide. With no civic authorities whatsoever the Haitian people created order, and life went on during the day, albeit without city water and electricity. Sounds of terror, mobs running through the streets, gunshots and screams, however, filled the nights. While we barricaded ourselves behind the meter-thick walls of the old Roi Christophe at night, vengeance reigned.

Today's headline tells part of the story: **"War Zone: Gangs do battle in streets with machetes over food..."**. You will think hunger. Wrong. Real hunger brings apathy and feebleness. The gangs battle not to eat, but to dominate with goods. Scarcity starts markets, and food and water come first. Inadvertently, large bureaucracies such as the UN, the U.S. State Department and various NGOs inevitably fuel the gangs. With the mountains of goods they manage, and no disciplined civil infrastructure to receive and distribute them, they have no choice.

Bureaucrats fill in the blanks on their clipboards and swap tales with reporters at the bar, but they rarely mingle in the street as CNN's careful lenses show you they do. They usually don't know where, at the end, their relief cargoes go. And a good thing they stay away from the end-recipients too. You don't want to know what may go on when big bureau-rats actually get to individual recipients of your largesse. Think of sending stuff to Zimbabwe. Will it get through? Or only line the pockets of Mugabe? Or provide sexual favors for his captains? Gangs have already pirated relief trucks coming over the border from DR clinics and churches.

Haitians suffer unbelievably now, and you must help. But how? Some "collecting" in your town may only practice "not letting a good crisis go to waste" — even Haitians, perhaps especially Haitians, if you know nothing about them. Let your taxes pay for the big bureaucracies' relief containers. My pittances go to Haitian friends with connections to their families in Haiti, or to specific orphanages, churches and the like. Don't know any? Ask your local clergy, or Google boots-on-the-ground groups such as Médecins Sans Frontières.

Anarchy rules Haiti again, if not "as ever". CNN revels pornographically in their pain. Politicians jostle for the cameras and the microphones, using Haiti's calamity to cloak what they do to you at home. They'll continue to play the disorder on you for their benefit. The world will want the U.S. to fill the perceived vacuum, then criticize them for it. Don't let them — disorder shall prevail in Haiti as always. France made the mess and profited from it. Let them clean it up in the long run.

In the end, only what you do for an individual Haitian will count. Local religious centers may give you the best visibility to how your contribution gets effectively used. If you have a Haitian community nearby, churches and synagogues can give you a direct hand helping local Haitians extract and care for their VISA-ed refugees. Feed and heal Haitians, not bureaucracies.

Do all you can for real Haitians in real need.