

MY SAY: Hypocrisy exposed in Haiti

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

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Suddenly, Haiti is on everyone's radar screen, barely a month after the failed Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in early December last year. That also happened to be the fifth anniversary of the dreadful tsunami that hit Aceh and the countries around the Indian Ocean on Dec 26, 2004. Many see the similarities between the two tragedies, especially in terms of the number of victims as well as the seemingly sudden nature of the disaster.

But there are many differences too. Aceh has generally been slightly luckier in that it has a larger land mass and a relatively small population of about four million. Aceh is also endowed with natural resources that it can use for its future development. Further, that area had been experiencing a long period of social instability that had caused the population to disperse to higher and more secure ground. Still, about 170,000 people in Aceh lost their lives.

As for Haiti, the story could be very different. To start with, it is undisputably the poorest country in the Americas, with a gross national product per capita of about US\$2 per day.

It is among the least developed countries in the world, and ranked 149th out of 182 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index in 2006. Three years on, about 80% of the population are estimated to be living in poverty.

Last year, Haiti met the conditions set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank for the Heavily Indebted Poor Country programme to qualify for cancellation of its external debt.

Geographically, it shares an island with neighbouring Dominican Republic, and has a much smaller land mass than Aceh, but twice as many people — about eight million — than the latter. It is also socially unstable due to longstanding sociopolitical strife, making the situation even worse.

Be that as it may, to the world at large, this beleaguered nation is almost unheard of. Its location close to the immensely wealthier and powerful North America, and the emerging and potentially rich Latin American countries, makes it difficult for one to reconcile the state of affairs.

To be sure, there is aid, but we know there is aid and then there is aid! What is apparent is that the impact is less than desired. As such, Haiti remains very vulnerable to even a mild disaster, let alone that fateful Jan 12 earthquake — the country's most severe in over 200 years.

As many as one million Haitians are reported to be homeless. Worse still, the epicenter of the quake was just outside the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince. The quake caused widespread damage and devastated the capital city. The Presidential Palace, Parliament building, UN mission headquarters and the National Cathedral were not spared.

Someone said if it had happened in neighbouring North America, the tragedy would have been minimal! In other words, Haiti could have been "saved" from the worst impacts much earlier if the world had responded to the devastation caused by the "virtual" earthquake that had wrecked the country long before this. It could have made a marked difference in terms of awareness if the planned book entitled: Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope, featuring "extraordinary" photographs and "memorable" essays, had been published much earlier. After all, there is no shortage of "extraordinary" photographs and "memorable" essays to fill a version with a slightly altered title — Haiti: Tragedy and Hope, minus the word "Earthquake".

Or to have mounted long before this, the all-star Hope for Haiti Now telethon, featuring two hours of desperate pleas for a desperate nation. As George Clooney was quoted as saying, "The Haitian people need our help."

Indeed, they do, except that we have been busy and not listening to them as we should. In fact, there are billions of others who are crying for help. But they must wait for another massive disaster to happen before they can be heard loud and clear, and even then, still not be sure if something worthwhile can be done. Even in the case of Hurricane Katrina, which hit the southern states of the US, help did not come immediately.

The irony of course, is that when the banks and financial system fail, through their own doing, trillions are poured in almost immediately. And yet they have the audacity to ask for more! It does not matter if the bailouts are at the expense of the taxpayer. The contradictions are too numerous to list.

Hence, there is no bigger hypocrisy than what has happened following the events post-Jan 12 in Haiti. Not only are they painful and tragic, but they bring out the worst in us. If only hypocrisy can cause an earthquake,

events in the wake of the Haiti tragedy would have an untold impact, much greater than a magnitude 7 on the Richter scale! We must be ashamed of ourselves.

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my

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