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Haiti-dominican Relations Improve Following Earthquake

by Charles Arthur
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In the wake of the tragic Jan. 12 earthquake (see NotiCen, January 21, 2010), good news has been hard to find, but one welcome development has been a noticeable warming in relations between Haiti and the neighboring Dominican Republic.

The animosity between the two countries that share the island of Hispaniola dates back to the early 19th century when Haiti invaded the Dominican Republic and ruled the eastern part of the island for 22 years. Ever since, nationalist politicians in the Dominican Republic have sought to stir up suspicions of Haiti and hostility toward its people. In 1937, Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo (1930-1938, 1942-1952) ordered the massacre of tens of thousands of Haitians living in the border area.

Despite the tense relations, for many decades Haitian workers were recruited to work as cane cutters on sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic. More recently, tens of thousands of migrants have found work in the recently booming tourism and construction sectors. Haitian labor played a key role in the Dominican Republic's economic growth during the later part of the last century, but immigrants from Haiti have never been allowed to settle or establish themselves. Each year, thousands of Haitians are rounded up by the Dominican Army and deported (see NotiCen, November 18, 2004).

In recent years, right-wing politicians played on concerns that too many Haitians were leaving their homeland and entering the Dominican Republic. With the Dominican economy slumping, Haitians were frequently used as scapegoats, blamed for depressing local wages by accepting work for considerably lower salaries. In this context, anti-Haitian violence reached new levels, with immigrants frequently beaten and even murdered.

Dominican Republic responds quickly and generously

Since the Jan. 12 earthquake that devastated the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince and many of the surrounding towns and villages, there has been a quite remarkable thaw in relations between the people of the two countries.

Immediately after the earthquake struck, Dominicans responded promptly and with great charity to their Haitian neighbors. They organized fundraisers and enlisted as volunteers to help the relief effort.

Dominican authorities threw open the border to Haitians in need of medical care and provided access to international aid workers coming into Haiti. University students with ties to Haiti were allowed to go back and help their families without any penalty. In addition, the deportation of immigrants was halted and millions of dollars worth of urgently needed supplies along with debris-
removing heavy equipment were sent into Haiti. Virtually every level of the Dominican government reached out to its Haitian counterpart.

Dominican workers unions were at the forefront of the immediate aid effort. A disaster-monitoring committee set up by three Dominican trade union centers worked round the clock to send food, water, and medicines to Port-au-Prince.

The aid was trucked across the border by members of the Dominican transport-workers union and was delivered to the Port-au-Prince base of the Confédération des travailleurs haïtiens (Confederation of Haitian Workers, CTH).

In the weeks that followed, Dominican unions continued to act as a bridge, funneling aid from unions around the world through the Dominican Republic and into southern Haiti.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Dominican Republic – some of which have been working for years to try to improve relations at the grassroots level – were also prominent.

One NGO, the Movimiento de Mujeres Dominico-Haitiana (MUDHA), organized response teams to deliver food, water, and medical aid to some of the worst hit and hardest-to-reach areas of Haiti. The first MUDHA team went into Haiti within 48 hours after the earthquake and continued to come every 15 days, because each group could only work in the field for two weeks before needing to return to the Dominican Republic to resupply. Recent convoys consisted of psychologists, social workers, doctors and nurses, and student volunteers.

After the most pressing crises subsided, the Dominican Republic government pledged some US $110 million to build a Haitian university that will be nearly one-third larger than all existing Haitian universities combined. Meanwhile, violence inside the Dominican Republic against Haitian migrants came to a welcome halt. Right-wing nationalists have been forced to tone down their anti-Haitian rhetoric.

**Export market entices Dominican government, businesses**

While, for the most part, the improved relations are founded on genuine feelings of concern and solidarity with survivors of the natural disaster, there are other, more hard-nosed considerations at play. The economies of the two countries are closely linked, with Haiti representing an important market for Dominican exports.

In 2009, the Dominican Republic earned US$647 million from exports to Haiti, including food, cement, and zinc. But, in the two months after the earthquake, Dominican officials and business leaders noted with concern that exports to Haiti fell by 20% compared with the same period the previous year.

A government study on the earthquake’s effects on commerce with Haiti warned that the Dominican economy would continue to suffer if other countries become the main suppliers during the reconstruction phase. In an effort to address this problem and to seize the business
opportunities presented by the disaster in Haiti, the Dominican Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (MIREX) has run seminars explaining how local business owners can win contracts to supply the UN and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Early indications are that Dominican businesses are having some success in winning these potentially lucrative contracts. In the three months ending in April, more than 100 Dominican companies – many with no previous experience of supplying the Haitian market – have sold US $5.5 million in products, including bread and latrines, to nonprofit organizations and UN agencies operating in Haiti. (Sources: Newsweek, 04/15/10; Inter Press Services, 04/20/10; Associated Press, 05/01/10.)

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