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Haiti Earthquake and tropical storm

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the question arises as to how old mistakes of international aid can be avoided. And this in the middle of a hopeless political crisis.

By Katja Maurer

Now this too. Another earthquake in Haiti, hitting the country at an almost hopelessly difficult time. This time the earthquake with a magnitude of 7.2 hit the south of the country with the cities of Jeremy, Les Cayes and Aquin. Then the tropical storm also followed, causing dangerous landslides in the vulnerable country.

Added to this is the political situation, which could hardly be worse. As a reminder, President Jovenel Moise was assassinated in early July. His assassination has still not been solved and one must assume some kind of coup d'état. The presidential guard, which should have protected him, showed no casualties. That alone raises more than questions. A coup d'état, however, would mean that those who now provide the interim government may themselves be implicated. Nevertheless, this force is to organize new elections on November 7. The new elections are being held under pressure from the international donor community, especially from the United States, to install another government that most consider wholly illegitimate. For no one in Haiti believes in elections, nor a ballot that is halfway clean. Even in the last presidential and parliamentary elections, voter turnout was 25 percent.

So there can be little talk of legitimacy here. But perhaps there is no need for legitimacy before the people. Because this kind of government can do whatever it wants as long as it fulfills its intended task: Preventing refugees from Haiti. It is no longer about democracy or a functioning statehood committed to the common good, but about a ruling regime that administers the interests of the riparian states, in this case the United States and the Dominican Republic: To provide labor where it is needed, and to repatriate it when it is no longer needed, and of course simply to keep people from leaving. Rarely has the world situation, as it is for a country on the edge of the universe, been so unvarnished.

It was clear by 2010 at the latest that Haiti would be hit by further earthquakes. Even this earthquake, with its catastrophic humanitarian consequences, had long been predicted by scientists as a danger. However, there were no earthquakes for almost two hundred years and the historical memory about this kind of danger has been lost.

Now, scientific studies predict that a whole series of earthquakes will shake Haiti in the coming years and decades. But the country and its people are not prepared for this. In the pictures from the earthquake region, as in 2010, one sees again and again the images of concrete houses folded in on themselves. The concrete is of poor quality, but until now it was the safest building material against all other forces of nature, especially tropical storms. These have even intensified with climate change. Haiti is one of the five countries in the world that is most affected by climate change and at the same time uses the fewest resources.

But what is commonly called the Haitian state lacked any institutional capacity to implement preventive measures such as the development of disaster prevention, education on earthquake codes of conduct such as the systematic construction of earthquake-resistant buildings. The recent earthquake in the south of the country evokes traumatic memories. The 2010 earthquake not only killed about 300,000 people, but also destroyed the institutional and material infrastructure in the capital, where everything was centered. The reconstruction at that time happened under the aegis of the United States and Western powers, militarily supported by the longest UN military operation, which cost a million dollars a day. The result of this humanitarian intervention is an even more dysfunctional state in which anyone and everyone who has access to funds, most of which come from abroad, enriches themselves.

The latest earthquake is once again triggering global aid reflexes, which are always underpinned by the same mentality. While the few pictures from the affected areas show how the local population is rescuing people and trying to bring the situation under control in great neighborly solidarity, an international aid machinery is being set in motion based on talk of the victims' alleged helplessness. This thinking falls back on the same prejudices over and over again: namely, that there is nothing in the country that can contribute to rescue. This old colonial idea wrapped in aid, which abuses and nullifies local capacities, is one of the building blocks in a superiority thinking that has now reached its end.

Under these circumstances, aid can only take place through local partners. It faces the challenge of concretely helping in the disaster and at the same time being committed to the project of making itself superfluous and being part of an institutional and social reconstruction that makes the right of self-determination and the common good of Haiti the center of its action. Given Haiti's exposure, aid cannot be limited to cushioning the disaster. But to align it with the comprehensive social and political idea of prevention would mean rethinking it completely. After the current events and the failure of international politics and international aid, this is now the challenge.