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Obama takes on huge task with long-term commitment to Haiti

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The country is an ecological disaster, with forests gone and land ruined by chemicals. The government is notoriously corrupt and the people's lives blighted by poverty, disease and violence.

That was Haiti before last week's devastating earthquake, which heaped a second lifetime's worth of troubles on an already devastated nation.

By decree of President Obama, Haiti's long-term recovery is America's newest major commitment, and even after disaster relief is addressed, the work has just begun.

"After suffering so much for so long, to face this new horror must cause some to look up and ask, have we somehow been forsaken?" Obama said last week at the White House. "To the people of Haiti, we say clearly, and with conviction, you will not be forsaken; you will not be forgotten."

The needs of the Haitians are incalculable, and their problems epic, historic and seemingly intractable. Obama's initial pledge of \$100 million is a tiny down payment on what it will take to begin fixing what's wrong with Haiti.

"Haiti is a basket case and it's always been a basket case," said Mark Jones, a Rice University political scientist and expert on Latin America. "It's a sinkhole for money."

International, private and other aid is pouring into Haiti in the wake of a 7.0 Magnitude earthquake that killed thousands and destroyed the nation's infrastructure, including roads, ports and buildings around the capital of



By decree of President Obama, Haiti's long-term recovery is America's newest major commitment, and even after disaster relief is addressed, the work has just begun. (JIM WATSON/AFP/Getty Images)

Port-au-Prince.

The earthquake is just the latest disaster to hit Haiti, which since its creation has been repeatedly destabilized by political upheaval, violence and natural disasters -- most often hurricanes and tropical storms worsened by deforestation.

During years of dictatorship that ended in the 1980s, Haiti lost most of its educated and professional class, many of whom came to the U.S., notably to practice medicine. Another wave of refugees were the so-called Haitian boat people, who fled their country for the U.S. on home-made rafts.

A significant concern for the Obama administration in the short-term aftermath of the earthquake is preventing another wave of Haitian refugees.

"One thing Obama wants to avoid is a mass migration from Haiti," Jones said. "And when things get bad in Haiti, you are going to get a lot of Haitians coming ashore in Miami."

How best to help Haiti rebuild is already under discussion inside the administration. Direct aid to the government is problematic, but funneling too much money through non-governmental organizations also tends to undermine the government.


Christopher A. Preble, a foreign policy expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the long-term problems of Haiti should be solved by Haitians.

"In the short term, it's an understandable impulse to ameliorate the suffering and try to get the government back on its feet," Preble said. "But over the long-term, the problems brought into relief by this earthquake will persist, and I am not convinced the answer to fixing all that is a long-term, large-scale U.S. intervention."

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