

Lessons must be learned from Haiti tragedy

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A disaster recovery expert has warned earthquake-stricken Haiti could take 60 years to return to normal and that Australia faces an equally massive catastrophe.

Professor Edward Blakely from the United States Study Centre in Sydney is researching disaster recovery in Japan.

He says the worst is by no means over for Haiti and that Australia must learn from the tragedy.

A 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck the impoverished island nation yesterday and aftershocks continue to rock the capital, Port-au-Prince.

Officials have warned the death toll could reach 100,000 and rival that of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.

Professor Blakely says there is much to be done in a country so full of chaos.

"This was an earthquake, there will be aftershocks, some of those aftershocks will be severe," he said.

"One never knows how many there will be or where they will occur, some of them may even occur in the ocean near Haiti, causing tidal disturbances or tsunamis."

He says Haiti needs food and medical assistance as soon as possible if order is to be maintained.

"Haiti is a poor country and there were people without food, water and other things before the disaster," he said.

"That situation is exacerbated now, and so one has to worry about civil order.

"We have to get the military trucks in there, provide food very early so that people will have all the supplies and things they need.

"Portable medical units also have to be implemented very quickly."

Professor Blakely says how well a country recovers from such a disaster is dependent on several factors, including the political and social system, the severity of the disaster and its location.

"In Haiti's case, all their basic infrastructure has been destroyed in their largest city, so that means a complete infrastructure re-do," he said.

"That could take 50 or 60 years to put in place, so it's not going to go back over night.

"It's fragile in Haiti - the government is fragile... public support can disappear very quickly in a time when there is a lot of



Disaster: Haitians carry an injured woman in Port-au-Prince (AFP: Thony Belizaire)

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stress."

He says while the physical damage will eventually be repaired, psychological damage to the nation will last much longer.

"Some people are never going to get over this... they wake up in the middle of the night... these scars can go on and it's going to take a long time before there is emotional healing there," he said.

Geologist Geoffrey Clarke from the University of Sydney says the damage in Haiti has been particularly bad due to the earthquake's magnitude, its depth and epicentre.

"The epicentre was only about 12 to 15 kilometres outside of Port-au-Prince... and it was quite shallow which meant that the shock wave was still extremely powerful when it hit the town," he said.

"The ground around the capital is quite soft and there is basically an amplification effect of the earth movement... a shockwave can move through the ground and shake much more vigorously, you get an actual wave.

"Also, the building codes are less than what we would be used to [in Australia] so there is a very large amount of devastation."

Professor Clarke says aftershocks are relatively unpredictable for the first few days and agrees that those currently occurring in Haiti are likely to cause further damage.

Not-so-lucky country

Professor Blakely says he is not at all surprised by the Haiti disaster and that Australia must prepare for a similar event.

"Haiti is one of the places on the map for an event of this scale because it's in the ring of fire," he said. "That is the area where there have been earthquakes for a very long time.

"The ring starts in the Caribbean, goes through Central America and the southern part of the US, out in the Pacific - including New Zealand and Australia - and that area is also subject to drought, fires and so forth."

But he says there are not enough experts to deal with the increasing number of natural disasters occurring around the world.

Professor Blakely says expertise in the field is extremely limited.

"The number of people who can handle events of this scale anywhere is relatively small," he said.

"I'm talking about the expertise of delivering the aid and how to organise and so on... someone has to be there to say, 'here's where you deliver the food, here's where the shelter has to be, here's where the new infrastructure has to be'.

"There are very few people in the world who are able to do that.

"Haiti is one event, but there is also an event in Indonesia, there is also an event in the Philippines, and at some point our resources are going to be stretched to the point where we will not have enough to cover the events.

"I would say that's going to be pretty soon."

That is why he says Australia must help Haiti as well as send a team of specialists to the country to learn from its disaster recovery management.

"We've had some pretty bad situations in Queensland with rains and the like - now what happens if we have rains in Queensland, fires in Victoria, fires in Perth and a tsunami in Darwin?" he said.

"This could all happen within two or three months of each other.

"Our most vulnerable places have to start looking at scenarios, planning and the positioning of our emergency services

so that we can respond to events of this type and this scale."

Professor Blakely says a disaster of equal proportion in Australia is imminent.

"An event of this scale will hit Australia, we don't know exactly when or where, but there is going to be one of them within five years," he said.

"It may be in Perth, it may be in Sydney, it may be in Brisbane, but it's going to happen.

"I just hope we don't think we're the lucky country."

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