

What Haiti earthquake can teach Taiwan

Written by Taiwan News Editorial
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On Jan. 12, the Caribbean nation of Haiti was rocked by a 7.0 magnitude earthquake which shattered most of the buildings in the nearby capital of Port au Prince, including the presidential palace and killed over 110,000 Haitian citizens and residents from other countries and made at least three million people into instant refugees amid devastated infrastructure.

Although the magnitude of the earthquake was considerably less severe than the 7.6 magnitude temblor that struck central Taiwan on Sep. 21, 1999 and killed over 2,000, the epicenter of the Jan. 10 quake was located near the Haitian capital and other highly populated areas and the damage was magnified by widespread poverty and the poor building quality.

Nevertheless, the tragedy in Haiti merits careful study by Taiwan to improve our own preparedness.

The Republic of Haiti, one of the world's 23 countries which has diplomatic ties with Taiwan, shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic, which also has formal links with our country.

Since achieving independence from France in 1804, Haiti has never been able to establish a stable democratic system and has experienced rule by various dictators.

In December 1990, the Haitian people gained a rare period of democratic rule when former priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected president in a general election with over two-thirds of the popular vote only to be ousted by a military coup in September 1991.

Since May 2006, Haiti has been led by President and agronomist Rene Garcia Preval, who served as Aristide's prime minister after the former leader returned to office in the mid 1990s. Plagued by instability and corruption, Haiti has become one of the world's most underdeveloped nations with an annual per capita income of only US\$380 for 153rd among the world's 177 nation and was unprepared for a disaster on this massive scale and urgently requires assistance from the world community.

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Taiwan has been particularly active in providing material assistance and monetary aid in the millions of U.S. dollars and sending two highly successful search and rescue teams which saved nine persons, including a senior U.N. staffer, from the rubble.

Taiwan is naturally one of the countries most concerned about earthquakes as it sits precisely on the "Ring of Fire" and needs to develop far more extensive and effective disaster prevention, rescue and relief systems than most other countries.

Unsafe island

In some fields, notably earthquake reporting systems and related information systems, Taiwan is very strong.

However, all too many public offices, schools and private office and residential buildings and public places generally lack clearly demarked or well prepared evacuation or emergency shelters and the degree of incorporation of earthquake resistant technology in building construction remains relatively low due to the laxity of official regulation and enforcement as well as the "cost-down above all" mentality of Taiwan businesses.

Moreover, there remain all too many gasoline, natural gas or chemical storage sites or production facilities located in or close to highly populated areas that pose a grave and constant danger to residents and would undoubtedly complicate the provision of emergency rescue services or evacuation.

Perhaps most worrying is the somnolence of disaster prevention and response command systems at all levels of government, as demonstrated by the sluggish reaction to the massive floods that hit southern Taiwan in the wake of the torrential rains left by Typhoon Morakot.

Moreover, the number, quality and equipment of such reaction teams remains inadequate and their deployment seems to lack both strategic thinking or effective and real-time linkages with local city and county command or preparedness systems.

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In addition, there are few signs that our disaster response teams or command systems are equipped with sufficient equipment, training or comprehensive priority planning or regular exercises on the restoration of key political, economic, military, high technology, communications, transportation, power or water facilities.

Taiwan urgently needs to develop an integrated, well-financed and trained disaster prevention and response system guided by the strategic concepts of "comprehensive security" encompassing natural disasters such as typhoons, floods, earthquakes, droughts, land and mud slides and manmade threats from explosion or poison chemical leakages, nuclear plant accidents, air disasters or war.

In addition, the government should develop clear systems for the mobilization of reserve military forces and provide subsidies and manpower training for civilian emergency shelter, evacuation and relocation and prepare detailed plans, organization and training programs that involve ordinary citizens in substantial ways and are not merely exercises in public relations.

Therefore, Taiwan urgently requires the grounding of disaster prevention and response authority and organization in legally mandated procedures to ensure that smooth and rapid reaction with ample legal authority in order to reduce casualties and damage to the lowest possible degree and facilitate rapid reconstruction.

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