

Hurricanes and Haiti: A Tragic History



“More misery in Haiti is an almost unfathomable thing. Already the poorest place in the Western Hemisphere, it has become even more destitute. . . . Suffering long ago became normal here, passed down through generations of children who learn that crying does no good. . . . But after four fierce storms in less than a month, the little that many people had has turned to nothing at all. Hunger is now intense. Difficult lives have become untenable ones.”

-New York Times, 9/10/2008

A Timeline of Tragic History

- In **1935**, an unnamed storm killed over 2000 Haitians
- In **1954**, **Hurricane Hazel** killed over 1000 Haitians.
- In **1963**, **Hurricane Flora** killed over 8000 Haitians.
- In **1994**, **Hurricane Gordon** killed over 1000 Haitians.
- In **1998**, **Hurricane Georges** killed over 400 while destroying 80% of all the crops in the country.
- In **2004**, **Hurricane Jeanne** passed north of Haiti as a tropical storm, dumping 13 inches of rains on the nation's northern mountains. The resulting floods killed over 3000 people.
- In **2008**, on August 26, **Hurricane Gustav** struck Haiti as a Category 1 storm while families were still recovering from the effects of Tropical Storm Fay, which touched down in Haiti on August 16, 2008. Gustav dumped 6 to 12 inches of rain, triggering floods and landslides which ultimately killed 77 people
- In **2008**, **Tropical Storm Hanna** made its way north of the island on Sept. 1, bringing more rain to an already critical situation. All of the country's 10 regions suffered severe flooding. About 6,000 people are still in shelters.
- In **2008**, on September 7, **Hurricane Ike** hit Haiti, killing 60 more people and increasing the flooding and the mudslides on deforested land.



How does poverty relate to the impact of natural disasters in Haiti?

The answer to that in large part is that these are not natural disasters--they are human-caused disasters related to the poverty in Haiti. Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. More than two-thirds of Haitians live on less than a dollar a day. With oil too expensive for the impoverished nation, charcoal from burnt trees has provided 85% or more of the energy in Haiti for decades. As a result, Haiti's 8 million poor, desperate for fuel, have chopped down huge amounts of forest, leaving denuded mountain slopes that rainwater washes down unimpeded.

Back in 1980, Haiti still had 25% of its forests, allowing the nation to withstand heavy rain events like 1987's Category 3 Hurricane Emily, without loss of life. But as of 2004, only 1.4% of Haiti's forests remained.

Jeanne and Gordon were not even hurricanes--merely strong tropical storms--when they struck Haiti, but the almost total lack of tree cover contributed to the devastating floods that killed thousands. In May of 2004, three days of heavy rains from another tropical disturbance dumped more than 18 inches of rain in the mountains, triggering floods that killed over 2,600 people.

Because the huge majority of Haitians do not have private insurance and because the government of Haiti does not have the capacity for rebuilding on a large scale, the impoverished people of Haiti cannot recover from these disasters as people from developed countries can. In addition, malnutrition around the country contributes to the lack of quick response to disaster; underfed and overstressed, most Haitians have been barely clinging to

survival. The food crisis in Haiti was dire even before the 2008 hurricane season (see the September 2008 National Geographic's article on Haiti, "Dirt Poor," <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2008/09/soil/bourne-text>.) and has been exacerbated now because of this latest round of hurricanes. Making matters worse, mental health services are almost nonexistent in Haiti, so the traumas of one disaster after another are never treated, further crippling the population.

What can be done to reduce the impact of natural disasters in Haiti?

Food distribution and other short-term disaster relief must be followed by a long-term commitment by developed countries, especially those on the American continent, to create structures and systems that will ensure that basic economic as well as social and political rights are extended to all Haitians.

Adequate and accessible food supplies and food security, health services, education, and community development efforts are critical to improving life in Haiti. Soil replenishment and agricultural subsidies are needed so Haitians can grow their own food again. Reforestation efforts and access to alternative fuels are needed so the country has more natural defenses against tropical storms.

Catholic Relief Services has long-term projects in Haiti and are also active in the immediate hurricane relief efforts going on there; go to www.crs.org to find more information and ways you can help.

Prayer

For the people of Haiti, "the least of these," O God we pray. Your children are in the depths of suffering, without food, homes, and the most basic forms of security, without hope. Their land is ravaged and their spirits in despair. In your mercy, open our eyes to what is happening in that country and open our hearts so we may respond. May we grow in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in Haiti. May they live to see rebuilding and renewal in their land. **Amen**

