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The earthquake in Haiti – protection for Swiss citizens

1. Successful mission on behalf of Swiss citizens in Haiti

The earthquake in Haiti on 12 January 2010 caused large-scale destruction to buildings and infrastructure, cost more than 250,000 lives, according to Haitian estimates, and left thousands more people homeless. One hundred and thirty Swiss citizens were registered with the embassy in Port-au-Prince before the earthquake struck. In total, just over 200 Swiss were in Haiti at the time of the earthquake (including tourists, unregistered persons and business travellers). Contact was established with 199 of them. Four people were reported injured. One person remains missing despite intensive, ongoing search efforts.

Directly after news of the earthquake broke, the crisis centre at the FDFA's Political Affairs Division VI, in parallel and in close cooperation with the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), set up a 24-hour crisis unit. Shortly afterwards, this was strengthened by the other sections concerned within the FDFA, FDJP and DDPS. The mandate of the crisis unit was:



Despite major difficulties, the FDFA was able to provide effective help to Swiss

- to manage the search for and identification of Swiss citizens,
- to organise on-the-spot help for Swiss citizens in need (in cooperation with the Social Aid for Swiss Citizens Resident Abroad Unit of the Federal Office of Justice),
- to assist persons wishing to leave the country with repatriation using all available means. In cooperation with the local representations, the Consular Protection Section of Political Affairs Division VI coordinated the return of Swiss citizens and organised medical care for the injured as well as their subsequent repatriation to Switzerland.

In order to help relieve the workload on the embassies in Port-au-Prince and Santo Domingo, the FDFA's crisis centre dispatched a total of eight staff from the crisis mission pool to Port-au-Prince and

Guidelines on emergency provisions:

RISE –

R egister and notify

I nform contacts

S tockpile supplies

E xercise a proactive approach

- **Register** with the Swiss representation responsible for you on your arrival in the foreign country (www.eda.admin.ch/eda/de/home/rebs.html).

- **Notify** the Swiss representation immediately of changes of address, additions to the family, deaths, changes to your civil status and changes to your contact details (telephone, e-mail, work and home addresses). If you are passing through, inform the representation of where you will be staying or your travel route and let the representation know how you can be contacted.

- Provide the Swiss representation with as much **contact information** as possible concerning contact persons – your closest relatives and friends – in the country abroad and in Switzerland. You must make sure you respond to corresponding questionnaires from the representation and complete the question sheets as fully as possible. It is in your own interests to do so.



Staff on the FDFA hotline providing information.



citizens in need in Haiti.

Santo Domingo. The first two pool members arrived in the crisis area, which was difficult to access, just hours after the earthquake. The crisis centre immediately set up a hotline number at the head office which received calls from concerned family members around the clock, recorded search and response messages, compared these and forwarded them on an ongoing basis to our representation in Port-au-Prince for processing.

Under exceptionally difficult conditions (collapse of telecommunications infrastructure, lack of fuel, interrupted electricity supply, shortage of food and water, widespread destruction), our embassy in Port-au-Prince succeeded in locating Swiss nationals in the country, providing care for the four injured and evacuating the 37 people who

■ Always keep a small supply of cash available at home in a safe place. Keep a supply of drinking water and food and, if necessary, a **supply** of fuel which will last for the first few days of a crisis. Keep an emergency kit at the ready which contains a radio, batteries, a torch, a change of clothing, personal hygiene items, a first aid kit and your travel documents (passport). Make sure you take out accident and illness insurance covering medical expenses in the event of injury.

■ Exercise a **proactive** approach yourself in a crisis situation and wherever possible immediately provide notice of your status to the Swiss representation or the FDFA's crisis team in Berne, either by telephone via the FDFA's hotline available in emergency situations (031 325 33 33) or via the search mask published on the FDFA's website (www.eda.admin.ch).

■ The authorities in certain risk areas (e.g. areas at risk of earthquake) have crisis management provisions. Please take the proactive step of contacting the local authorities for this information and follow their instructions.



wanted to leave by land on five buses and by air in a Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit helicopter to Santo Domingo. Twenty of this group returned to Switzerland and were looked after by the DDPS' Federal Office for Civil Protection immediately on arrival.

2. What lessons can be learned from the mission?

The mission on behalf of Swiss citizens in Haiti can be regarded as a success in light of the smooth management of the repatriation operation. That said, the Swiss embassy in Port-au-Prince did face difficulties in the search for Swiss nationals and in providing support to those wishing to leave. Some of these obstacles were unavoidable and are explained by the extraordinary nature of the disaster. Others were self-inflicted and could have been avoided through careful preparation for a crisis situation by all Swiss citizens residing abroad.

What hindered the search for Swiss nationals and assistance with leaving the country?

The earthquake temporarily caused a complete failure of the telecommunications system. Owing to the temporary loss of the local fixed network, the mobile communications network and satellite connections, the embassy was unable to reach Swiss citizens. Only communication via the Internet was possible.

The record of registered persons at the embassy did not correspond to the current status of Swiss citizens residing in the country because the registrations were not up-to-date. Some Swiss nationals had left without giving the embassy notice of their departure, while others had arrived without registering with the embassy.

The addresses entered in the records were inaccurate owing to a lack of precise information provided by those registered. The records often contained no precise address details (street, house number). This made the search for Swiss citizens more difficult amidst the widespread devastation.

Inserat

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It took several days to definitively confirm the status of many Swiss nationals as many had departed individually without notifying the embassy.

Some Swiss citizens were affected by shortages of food and drinking water shortly after the earthquake. A lack of cash was also evident as the earthquake destroyed banks and disrupted automatic cash dispensers.

3. Individual emergency provisions

With a view to improving individual preparations for various kinds of future emergency situations (natural catastrophes, other major events and political unrest, etc.), the FDFA's Political Affairs Division VI has produced brief guidelines which should facilitate cooperation for you and the FDFA in the event of future crises. (see box).

Thank you for taking note of this advice.

Christoph Späti, Political Affairs Division VI

UN reconstruction conference in New York: Switzerland to support Haiti with 90 million Swiss francs

Switzerland is committed to providing long-term support for Haiti. Martin Dahinden, Director-General of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, underlined Switzerland's solidarity with the earthquake-ravaged Caribbean country at the UN Donors' Conference in New York on 31 March 2010. The federal government will contribute a total of CHF 35.9 million to the rebuilding of Haiti up to 2012, while an additional CHF 55 million will come from donations collected directly by Swiss Solidarity and its partner organisations.

The Swiss delegation headed by Martin Dahinden, Director-General of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, presented its programme to support the people of Haiti at the "Towards a New Future for Haiti" ministerial conference on 31 March in New York. In addition to humanitarian aid, Switzerland will also support Haiti with its long-term reconstruction plans. At the conference, Martin Dahinden indicated where Switzerland will focus its efforts: "In the wake of the devastating earthquake, Switzerland provided Haiti with support through the biggest emergency aid operation ever carried out by Switzerland. What is more, Switzerland will also help the country with its reconstruction efforts. We anticipate that the rebuilding of social infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, the development of rural regions and the security of food supplies will represent the main challenges for the long-term reconstruction programme."

Switzerland will follow the guidelines of the UN's reconstruction action plan for Haiti. To ensure these efforts do not focus exclusively on the capital Port-au-Prince, Switzerland will also support decentralised projects in synchronisation with the intentions of the Haitian government. Switzerland has been running a cooperation office in Port-au-Prince since 2005 and is therefore very familiar with conditions in the country.

Switzerland's contribution to the economic, social and political reconstruction will be financed by the restructuring of existing framework credits and will be covered by the 2006 credit line for humani-

tarian aid (CHF 20 million) and the 2008 credit line for development cooperation (CHF 15.9 million). The aid between 2010 and 2012 will therefore total CHF 35.9 million, in addition to CHF 55 million in donations raised directly by Swiss Solidarity and its partner organisations.

NEW POPULAR INITIATIVES AND REFERENDA

By the time of going to press, the following new popular initiatives had been launched since the last edition:

- "Für ein liberales Rauchergesetz" (For a liberal smoking law), initiative committee: IG Freie Schweizer Wirte, deadline for collection of signatures: 23.08.2011.
- "Neue Arbeitsplätze dank erneuerbaren Energien (Cleantech-Initiative)" (New employment thanks to renewable energies (Cleantech Initiative)), initiative committee: Social Democratic Party of Switzerland, deadline for collection of signatures: 16.09.2011.
- "Schluss mit der MwSt-Diskriminierung des Gastgewerbes" (End to VAT discrimination in the hotel and catering industry), initiative committee: "Schluss mit der MwSt-Diskriminierung des Gastgewerbes" inter-party committee, deadline for collection of signatures: 07.10.2011.
- "Schutz vor Rasern" (Protection against speeding drivers), initiative committee: RoadCross Schweiz, deadline for collection of signatures: 27.10.2011.
- "Für ein bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen finanziert durch Energielenkungsabgaben" (For an unconditional basic income financed by energy incentive taxes), initiative committee: "Für ein bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen finanziert durch Energielenkungsabgaben" initiative committee, Ms Gabriela Coray, deadline for collection of signatures: 19.11.2011.
- "Wenden wir die Menschenrechte an auf Frauen und Männer = Schweiz" (Let's apply human rights to men and women = Switzerland), initiative committee: "Wenden wir die Menschenrechte an auf Frauen und Männer = Schweiz" initiative committee, deadline for collection of signatures: 19.11.2011.

By the time of going to press, no referenda were pending.

At www.bk.admin.ch/aktuell/abstimmung you will find a list of pending referenda and popular initiatives and the corresponding signature forms if available. Please complete, sign and send the forms directly to the relevant initiative committee.

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