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*General Secretariat - Office for International Affairs and Human Rights*

**Statement by Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko, LWF General Secretary  
on the situation in Haiti  
22 January 2010**

Ten days after an earthquake struck Haiti, the full extent of the loss of life and devastation is only now becoming clearer. This disaster has not affected only a part of the country. It has devastated the whole nation, destroyed the infrastructure of most basic services, and crippled the machinery of government and its capacity to help its own citizens.

People throughout the world are lamenting and crying out to God: *Why* is such overwhelming death and destruction concentrated in one small country, a country whose people have already suffered far more than their fair share of natural and human-made disasters, and which was already the poorest country in the western hemisphere? Such apocalyptic scenes may remind some of biblical visions of judgment, but rather than a judgment on the people of Haiti, this tragic event can be seen as a time of judgment, reckoning and accountability for the whole human community: *Why* have we allowed such underdevelopment and impoverishment to exist and grow worse for so long in countries such as Haiti, rendering the people so vulnerable to natural disasters such as this?

The LWF, along with its ACT Alliance partners, calls for a new and lasting engagement with Haiti, going beyond emergency response and recovery to a deeper solidarity with Haiti's struggle for stability and development. After the earthquake and its consequences disappear from the international news headlines, the international community must continue to accompany Haiti in new long-term partnership based on a clear analysis and acknowledgement of the historical, political and economic processes that already before the earthquake had led Haiti into such a vulnerable situation.

The prospects of the world's first black republic were poisoned from the outset by external economic and political oppression. After Haiti won independence from France and abolished slavery, France threatened to invade unless Haiti compensated it for the loss of its "property", including slaves. With French warships positioned off the coast, Haiti gave in to French demands in 1825, and agreed to pay a massive sum, financed by a loan from a French bank, in return for recognition of Haiti's sovereignty. Haiti was forced to send any available cash to France, diverting revenues from investments in infrastructure, education and government services. Haiti descended into a spiral of debt and underdevelopment from which it has never recovered.

Corruption and neglect, especially under the Duvalier dictatorships, compounded the suffering of the Haitian people. Though the misuse of resources by these regimes was widely reported, donor countries and international financial institutions continued to lend them money.

Cancellation of 1.2 billion USD of Haiti's debt was finally agreed to in 2009, but only after a long-overdue and tortuous process. This left Haiti still 'owing' more than USD 800 million. In the light of Haiti's history of international and domestic exploitation, the environmental and social devastation it has suffered as a result, and now the calamitous effects of the earthquake, it is illegitimate for these debts to continue to be claimed. I call for an immediate and complete moratorium on Haiti's debt service obligations, and cancellation of the remaining debt. I call for international assistance to Haiti – including that now offered by the International Monetary Fund in the context of this emergency – to be provided in the form of grants, not loans such as that which set the newly-born republic on the road to intractable poverty and vulnerability. I call for concerted international cooperation in repatriating funds stolen from the people of Haiti by former dictators. And I call, in the post-disaster period, for long-term international cooperation for education and the promotion of investment in Haiti.

In the meantime, the global emergency response to this disaster must match its unprecedented circumstances. The conditions for effective and comprehensive distribution of essential supplies to all affected areas must be secured as a matter of utmost priority. The role of the government of the Dominican Republic, Haiti's neighbor, will be particularly important in facilitating the landward transit of humanitarian supplies and personnel. It will also be essential for the mandate of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) to be adapted and extended by a sufficiently lengthy period to provide meaningful assistance in Haiti's recovery.

LWF staff members are working as hard as they can, together with ACT Alliance and UN partners, to bring aid to the people of Haiti, in exceptionally difficult conditions. The LWF is scaling up its emergency relief activities in Haiti, while maintaining its regular development work to support livelihoods for Haitians. In the aftermath of the earthquake, large population shifts are taking place, with people moving from the worst-hit cities to other communities and the countryside. The exact numbers of internally displaced people are still unclear, but will easily reach 500,000 to 600,000 people. The LWF is planning to work, in cooperation with other ACT Alliance members and UN organizations, on giving secure and durable shelter to the displaced people.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the people of Haiti demonstrated their greatest strengths – their resilience, and their sense of community – rediscovering their identity as a nation. While international assistance was still en route, or held up at the airport, neighbor helped neighbor, digging in the rubble of collapsed buildings to find survivors, and sharing precious necessities for life. I pray for the people, the government, and the churches of Haiti – including the Eglise Lutherienne d'Haiti – as they struggle to rebuild lives, communities and hope in the wake of this calamity.

The time is now to reverse Haiti's history of disaster and impoverishment, and to build hope in Haiti's future.

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