



DRSEA INFORMER

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Desastre En Haití Se Siente En La República Dominicana (Disaster In Haiti Felt In Dominican Republic) – I learned a new word in Spanish recently, one that I had not sought to include in my increasing vocabulary, but one that is now solidified in my mind, an indelible part of my experience living in the Dominican Republic.

I was sitting on the porch of the Hotel Mercure in the Zona Colonial of Santo Domingo, not far from my home. My friends and I gather there frequently to while away an hour or two, sharing gossip over a cup of coffee or cold beer as we watch the street drama pass on the Conde, the pedestrian thoroughfare that runs the length of the main shopping/tourist area in this historic district that dates back to the landing of Columbus.

I knew something was wrong when a dizzy sensation passed over me, like my inner ear balance was suddenly haywire. Then we all noticed the table rattling and one of my friends pointed to the light post (below) swaying back and forth.



In a few terrifying moments I went from wondering what was happening to knowing exactly what was happening to bracing for what could happen. It was a *terremoto*, Spanish for earthquake.

I got a call within moments from my friend Paco, who said his apartment building about a mile away had been rocked by the tremors, and he, like me, was fearful what might be next. But other than a few people rushing out of surrounding buildings, the excitement was pretty much over – or so we thought.

A short time later, the television in the hotel was blaring news that a major quake had hit Haiti, the country that shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. The tremors we felt were the shock waves of a 7.0 monster that devastated Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti with a population of 3.6 million. Those first television images were enough to let us know that a catastrophe had occurred.

Hispaniola has been hit with five major quakes in the past 500 years, with the last one taking place in the Dominican Republic in 1946. Fortunately, that 8.0 *terremoto* struck during a holiday when most people were outside; only about 100 people perished. Haiti, of course, would not be nearly as lucky.

The entire island lies on top of one of the largest faults in the world; the question has never been if, but when the next earthquake would strike, and when I heard about the collapse of Port-au-Prince, I was immediately mindful that – save the fickleness of nature – Santo Domingo could have been lying in ruins, with my friends and neighbors, and perhaps even me, buried in rubble. Much of the devastation in Haiti is because the housing stock was weak and unstable and, while most buildings in Santo Domingo are better constructed, a 7.0 quake would still have caused severe damage. I kept thinking.....there but for the grace of God.

Ironically, most construction in the Dominican Republic is done to strict, earthquake-resistant standards – and built by extremely skilled Haitian laborers.

As the horror in Haiti unfolded, I received numerous texts and e-mails wondering about my safety, but my mind and heart were hundreds of miles away. I have Haitian friends here in Santo Domingo who didn't know if their family members were dead or alive as the world tried to respond to what is certain to be one of the worst natural disasters in history. And television and Internet provided a front row seat to the crisis that will continue to unfold for months, even years.

I had visited Haiti more than 20 years ago, when Baby Doc still ruled the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere and was awed not only by its amazing beauty but also the crippling level of poverty that choked the people. Slaves revolted to take command of Haiti in 1804, but the country has always had slave masters who have raped and plundered, including the United States whose troops occupied the country for more than 20 years and propped up puppet governments that later included the notorious François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, who murdered thousands of his countrymen, all the time siphoning off millions while most of the people in Haiti lived in abject poverty. Even before the earthquake, many Haitians got by on less than \$1 a day; unemployment was at 70 percent.



Haiti: Poor, Beautiful, Deadly

And now? Television continues to give us wall-to-wall coverage of the destruction, the human toll in death and injury, the stories of courage, faith and perseverance, of the world rallying in support. Much of the first response came from the Dominican Republic where the president directed hospitals to treat injured Haitians, and Dominicans collected lakes of water and mountains of clothes for the displaced. Much of the ongoing relief effort is being staged from the Dominican Republic.

The response of Dominicans has been heartwarming, not only because of the overwhelming need for assistance, but also because of the fragile relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Haiti once ruled over this country and the resentment over that occupation still lingers in the Dominican Republic where Haitians supply a great deal of the manual labor. Legal and illegal Haitian immigrants cross over into the Dominican Republic to take jobs most Dominicans don't want, not unlike what happens between the United States and Mexico.

With the earthquake, it is expected that thousands of Haitians will seek refuge in the Dominican Republic, overloading a system with limited resources and further straining Haitian-Dominican relations, and creating the potential for a new crisis, one that will have to be addressed as the world promises to rebuild Haiti.

Rebuild Haiti? It is a concept I am uncomfortable with because I am unclear of what that means. Port-au-Prince was a city originally laid out for 40,000 people, but had 3.6 million residents, the vast majority of them dirt poor and surviving at a sub-poverty level. A friend of mine equated the devastation not to a tumble down a flight of stairs, but to standing on a bottom step and falling off that one step. Is it going to be rebuilt to the look like the bottom step again? In a country with nothing, restoring it to nothing will mean nothing, and having nothing is exactly what contributed so much to the current situation. The country was still cleaning up from four hurricanes and tropical storms in August and September 2008; more than 800 people died and 300 others are still listed as missing. The storms caused \$897 million in damage, or nearly 15 percent of the country's gross domestic production, and have been called "Haiti's Katrina."

Before the earthquake, there were 10,000 organizations in Haiti devoted to the health and welfare of the people, feeding and clothing them, delivering medical care, providing education, to the point where the government of Haiti was meaningless. If rebuilding Haiti means reconstructing a grim past than all that can be expected is a grim future.

Haiti was once the richest of all the colonies in the Americas; then it had the title of poorest country in the hemisphere with no visible means of support other than charity – before the earthquake. Unless the rebuilding effort addresses that – at the very least offering dignified poverty – the exploitation of the impoverished nation will continue.

In the last few days, I have heard Haiti called a cursed land, forsaken by God, but I can't believe that. It is easy to have faith when things are going well; faith is tested and needed most when things are at their worst.

I am numbed by the devastation, the body count, the human toll, but faith inspires me to believe that anything is possible, and the outpouring of humanitarian aid, as well as medical and spiritual comfort from around the world reinforces that faith. But sometime in the future, the last body will be pulled from the rubble and CNN will turn off the TV lights to go cover the next big story. How the world will act when there are no cameras, when death and destruction are not as imminent, will reflect global faith in a sustainable Haiti, free of hunger and poverty, political instability and social injustice. As a friend of mine said, "Hopefully the world will make an effort and rebuild a *NEW*, better Haiti."

God willing.

La Ventaja De Campo (Home Court Advantage) – In what looks like a continuing trend, a court in the Dominican Republic has ordered the New York Yankees to pay more than \$750,000US to Carlos Rios, their former director of Latin American scouting, after ruling that his firing was unlawful. Judge Alexis Gomez Geraldino ruled in favor of Rios, who was dismissed in August 2008 for allegedly skimming \$100,000 in bonus money from Yankees prospect Kelvin De Leon. The judge said the charges against Rios were based on rumor and ordered the Yankees to pay him \$762,878 in damages. The team plans to appeal.

In August 2008, the Yankees vacated the contracts of Rios and scout Ramon Valdivia for allegedly taking bonus cash from De Leon. Valdivia last year won a defamation suit against De Leon, who paid him \$70,000 in compensation. Victor Burgos, investigating the case for Major League Baseball, acknowledged in court testimony that he made a mistake in a report accusing Rios of skimming money from De Leon, an outfielder New York signed in 2007 at age 16 for \$1.1 million.



Kelvin De Leon

A couple of months ago, another Dominican court ordered the Washington Nationals to pay \$40,000 in damages to a scout who was fired after signing a prospect who lied about his age. Jose Baez, the Nationals' former director of operations in the Dominican Republic, sued the team for what he said was an unjustified firing after Baez and special assistant to the general manager Jose Rijo signed a player who identified himself as 16-year-old Esmailyn Gonzalez.



Esmailyn Gonzalez /Carlos Alvarez Daniel Lugo

The Nationals gave the player a \$1.4 million signing bonus; Major League Baseball later discovered that Gonzalez was almost four years older than he claimed and also lied about his identity. His real name is Carlos Alvarez Daniel Lugo.

The judges in the case also directed the Nationals to pay Baez six months salary, plus other damages – including holiday pay and a severance package – that will bring the total payment to almost \$75,000. Testimony by baseball investigator Nelson Tejada is said to have supported Baez's assertion that he had nothing to do with Gonzalez's age and identity change.

The two cases provide further proof that Dominicans have home-field advantage in their own country with regards to the courts. The question now is whether MLB will be reluctant to pursue Dominicans for alleged misdeeds. There is fear that some Dominicans, believing that Dominican courts are inclined to side with them, will be more likely to commit unsavory acts, further clouding the murky waters of baseball in the Dominican Republic.

Las Calles De San Francisco (The Streets of San Francisco) – If you are ever in San Francisco de Macoris, do not stay at the Hotel Soloy. I learned that lesson the hard way during a recent visit to what is considered the fifth most important city in the Dominican Republic.



Downtown San Francisco de Macoris

I had been to the sleepy metropolis one time before, on a day trip to visit my friend Carolina, a young poet I meet about a year ago in Santo Domingo. Her writings are very emotional, in Spanish or translated into English, a rare feat since many words are not always interchangeable and can convey entirely different meanings.

I had promised Carolina that I would return and stay longer and had delayed the trip for months before finally setting a date to return, agreeing to spend the night if Carolina could find an inexpensive hotel for me.

The two-hour bus ride was pleasant enough, taking me through lush, beautiful areas of the Dominican Republic that give me additional evidence of the vastness and diversity of this wondrous country. Carolina met me at the station and arranged for a friend to drive me to the hotel.

My first indication that I would not be staying at the Waldorf was the route to the hotel, which took us through a narrow street lined from one end to the other with chicken coops that were being methodically emptied by men who skillfully twisted the necks of the birds, lopped their heads off, plucked and gutted them, and tossed them on piles of their predecessors to head to market in time for dinner. All the while, other workers scooped chicken guts, feathers and blood into wheelbarrows to be carted away. Dogs licked at puddles of blood that pooled in the street. Imagine the smell in the 90-degree heat.

The hotel is nondescript, one of those places you would miss if you weren't looking for it; the sign is crudely hand painted, the bars on the door uninviting, but I persevered nonetheless. The warning signs continued when the registration area – I would hardly call it a lobby – was empty, yet the television was on and a glass with melting ice sat on a table. I fought back the image of Norman peering through a hole in the wall at the Bates Motel in the movie *Psycho*.

We were about to leave when a man appeared who was a cross between Igor, Dr. Frankenstein's assistant, and the Crypt Keeper. I kid you not. He inquired if I wanted a room with a television or without; of course I wanted the TV room, which he indicated would be expensive – 350 pesos for the night, which is less than \$10US.

I should have ran right then, right? But as long as I had come this far, I figured I would look at the room. Room 10 was identifiable by that number written in Magic Marker® on the door. Inside the small room was a single, narrow bed, a broken down chair, a mirror with a shelf and hooks on the wall to hang clothes. The small bathroom had a flushing toilet and a shower stall with the sink inside the stall. Prison cells offer more luxury.

I pulled back the covers on the bed and the sheets appeared clean; I didn't see anything that could stick to me, but I wasn't planning on sleeping between the covers anyway. As a precaution, I sprayed the bed with the insect repellent I always carry, just to give myself a fighting chance in case any critters lurked in the mattress. It was only for one night, I kept telling myself.

I spent the next few hours at various locations in San Francisco, enjoying catching up with Carolina, listening to and reading some of her recent poems, and relishing the quietness – some would say boredom – that dominates the town. A crowd actually gathered to watch a street being paved, but it was a nice break from the hustle and bustle of Santo Domingo.

Carolina and her boyfriend wanted to spend the night in another room at the hotel so we went back there for them to register; I wanted to change clothes before we headed out again. This is when things got worse, if you can believe it. First, there were no more rooms with televisions. Then the night Crypt Keeper announced that I would have to vacate my room at 8 a.m. Why? Because that was the time the cleaning lady came. After much discussion, we were assured a 9:30 a.m. reprieve.

It was only then that I discovered there was no running water in the shower or its sink. A large plastic can held water and a makeshift scoop to bathe. I wanted to check out immediately but was told that Igor had left for the day and taken the money with him. Room 10 at the Hotel Soloy was going to be my home for the night.

I tossed and turned all night from both the lumpiness of the bed and the constant street noise that filtered through the paneless windows. I finally drifted off about 5 a.m., determined to get a couple hours sleep before dawn.

Around 8, I was awakened by the sound of running water, discovering that water is turned on at certain hours and I rapidly took advantage by taking a quick shower in the cold stream that poured from the pipe in the stall. No sooner had I stepped from the shower when a knock came at the door with an announcement of "*Es hora,*" or "It's time." Simultaneously, both electricity and water in the room cut off. I dressed as fast as I could, opened the door to leave, and standing there waiting was the cleaning lady who demanded the key to the room.

Needless to say, I won't be staying at the Hotel Soloy again. Bargain hotels are widely available in the Dominican Republic, but this was no bargain. More like *Nightmare on Elm Street*:

*"One, two, Freddy's coming for you.
Three, four, better lock your door.
Five, six, grab your crucifix.
Seven, eight, gonna stay up late.
Nine, ten, never sleep again.*

Charles S. Farrell

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