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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Storm-Tossed Lessons

By JULIA TAFT

**F**rom Trinidad to Tallahassee, Fla., tropical storms have ravaged the Caribbean basin, exacting a multibillion-dollar toll on housing, schools, hospitals, roads and sewage systems.

Most of the casualties were in Haiti. But almost no community escaped unscathed. In Grenada, half of the population is now homeless, the famed nutmeg groves flattened, the power plants wrecked. The tourism industry that was the island's lifeblood could take years to recover. Many other islands - including Tobago, Jamaica and Grand Cayman - also suffered.

The biggest killer in natural disasters is poverty. The same hurricane tides that flood houses in Florida sweep away entire neighborhoods in places like Gonaïves, Haiti. And while survivors need places to live, simply rebuilding their tin-roofed shacks in flood plains guarantees they will suffer again. Better planning, and more focused foreign aid, can help even poor nations reduce the loss of life and property from natural disasters.

Compare the consequences of the storms in the two countries that share the island of Hispaniola. In the Dominican Republic, which has invested in hurricane shelters and emergency evacuation networks, the death toll was fewer than 10, as compared to an estimated 2,000 in Haiti. And Cuba's proven ability to survive hurricanes with few casualties - Ivan claimed no lives there because two million people were swiftly moved out of harm's way - is a testament both to the value of disaster response planning and the need for it throughout the Caribbean.

According to climatologists, vulnerable coastal communities should be prepared for greater erosion and more severe floods in the future. Poor countries need help to rebuild and to better protect themselves against future such calamities. The United Nations is now beginning appeals for emergency humanitarian aid for Grenada and Haiti to provide food, temporary shelter and basic health care.

But long-term development assistance in the Caribbean from agencies like mine, as well as from donors like the United States, must focus on reducing the destructive impact of these storms. Virtually every school, road, hospital or housing settlement destroyed in Grenada by Hurricane Ivan or in Haiti by Hurricane Jeanne was financed with foreign assistance.

Reconstruction often occurs with such haste that countries end up with even greater exposure to future hurricanes. But housing developments can be sited and designed to avoid the worst damage.

In an effort to promote better long-term planning, the United Nations Development Program early this year evaluated disaster preparedness in scores of nations. It showed Haitians were 100 times more likely to die in an equivalent storm than Dominicans. In the storms that hit last week in Gonaïves, flash floods occurred in just a few hours because upstream terrain has long since been stripped of forests and topsoil.

The magnitude of the destruction in Haiti and Grenada underscores the need for vulnerable island states to develop policies that will enable them to withstand these storms. And from the international development community, they deserve not just more aid, but smarter aid.

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