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Haiti Earthquake and "Tectonic" Weapons

Coffee Beans

Prof. RNDr. Vanda Boštíková, Ph.D., Prof. RNDr. Aleš
Macela, DrSc

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that disinformation can spread rapidly worldwide, especially during emergencies, and can lead to social behavior that exacerbates the emergency. Such consequences have been observed after major earthquakes.

Consider Haiti more than thirteen years ago. Tremors measuring 7.2 on the Richter scale struck this poorest country in the Western Hemisphere on 12 January 2010 at 16:53 local time. It lasted 35 seconds. Haiti is still struggling with the effects of the earthquake today. Millions of people are still dependent on international food aid and thousands are surviving in makeshift conditions. This environment is conducive to various kinds of disinformation. One of the most widespread was the claim that it was the US military that caused the tragic earthquake in Haiti. On the website of Venezuela's ViVe TV, information appeared that the terrible events were caused by a "faulty" test of a tectonic weapon by the US Navy. The report further stated that the weapon was being developed and tested for use against Iran. Shortly afterward, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez went on television to repeat the report (1-3). To this day, some of the disinformation that began to spread among the local population, particularly after the cholera outbreak as a result of the natural disaster, is still being repeated. The local population, due to their ignorance and low health literacy, considered cholera to be yet another independent blow dealt to them from outside.

The explanation for the earthquake is quite simple. The island is located at the interface of two lithospheric plates - the Caribbean and the North American. To the north of the island, the Caribbean plate is sliding eastwards onto the North American plate at a rate of about 20 mm per year. Seismologist Roger Musson of the British Geological Survey said that "the fault has been blocked for 250 years, gradually building up pressure, which was released in 2010 and caused a major earthquake" (4). The energy released by the shifting plates reached the surface almost undamped, with the epicenter near the town of Léogâne, about 25 km west of the capital Port-au-Prince. It is one of the most populated regions of the country. According to the Haitian statistics office, the population of the area at the time was estimated at 2.5 million inhabitants (the population estimate is only approximate, made difficult by the rampant growth of the slums). About 10 minutes after the earthquake, a tsunami alert was issued, which reached the coast after a further 47 minutes. In the towns of Jacmel and Petit Paradis (on the south coast), the waves reached a height of three meters.

More than 200,000 people died and another 300,000 were injured. Two million people lost their homes. After the disaster, chaos and looting broke out in the country, and armed gangs of six thousand convicts who had escaped from prison were terrifying. The enormous scale of the damage was the result of several factors, including the proximity of the epicenter of the earthquake to the capital, the overcrowding of the area, the poor quality of the buildings, the absence of a warning system and political instability. In addition, the country suffered the worst cholera epidemic in modern history due to

the desperate sanitation conditions. More than ten thousand people have died from the disease. The United States took on a serious role as the main aid coordinator from the very first days, gradually sending 22 000 troops to the island to help clear debris and provide security. Two thousand rescue workers in seventy foreign teams were involved in the search for victims. Ten thousand UN personnel also helped.

In this context, it is certainly not without interest that three years ago an international group of social scientists, seismologists, and statisticians launched the RISE-TURNKey project (5). The project is based, among other things, on an analysis of what is happening in Haiti, and one of its outputs is a "communication guide" that can communicate credible information about the earthquake to institutions, practitioners, and other actors in order to prevent and combat disinformation. It is mainly about explaining the process of natural disasters, trying to present even complex technical information in a way that is understandable to people without relevant education, so that they do not succumb to nonsensical theories and ideas that then prevent them from thinking rationally, following the correct recommendations and saving their lives in the event of ordered evacuations, instead of blindly believing in the irrational belief that nothing can happen.



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