

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 5, 2010 at 12:53pm

Haitian bishop leery of 'militarization' of US aid

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- A Haitian Catholic bishop said the United States "can do much more" to help his earthquake-stricken country, and warned against an "excessive militarization" of American relief efforts.

Bishop Pierre-Andre Dumas, head of the Haitian branch of the Catholic relief network Caritas, made his remarks at a press conference in Rome Feb. 3. The Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti has left more than 180,000 dead, at least 195,000 wounded, and more than 1 million homeless.

Dumas praised Washington's recent decision to subsidize the treatment of wounded Haitians in Florida hospitals, but said that "given its geographic position with respect to Haiti, the American government can do much more."

Echoing criticism by some Latin American and Italian officials of the large U.S. troop presence in the country, Dumas said "it is necessary to avoid an excessive militarization of aid, and to rediscover the humane and humanitarian side of the aid that must be given to the Haitian people."

Dumas called on "President Obama, as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, to use all his influence to make aid efforts more comprehensive and global." He said he hoped Obama himself would visit Haiti "in the next days or weeks."

The bishop spoke to the press shortly after meeting briefly with Pope Benedict XVI, following the pope's weekly public audience at the Vatican. Dumas said he told Benedict of the urgent need to rebuild the many Haitian churches, including Notre Dame Cathedral in the capital city of Port-au-Prince, which was destroyed by the earthquake.

"But it is not only a question of rebuilding churches," Dumas said he told the pope. "We must also create spaces, near the churches, of welcome and education for our people."

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