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Haiti, we have a problem ...

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Less than a week from now, on 7 February, a new President should take office in Haiti. But there is a problem: Haiti does not have a new president.

Relations between President Michel Martelly's party, Tèt Kale, and the opposition were tense during most of the Martelly's tenure. But they reached unprecedented levels after the first round of presidential elections on 25 October. As a consequence, the runoff, initially set for 27 December, was postponed twice and now there isn't even a new date on the books.

The endless scenes of street protests with its heavy toll of people injured and property damaged, as well as reports of excessive use of force by the police against demonstrators are a reflection of just how disturbing the situation is as Haitians ride out this leadership limbo. Some influential people have gone as far as threatening to bring the country to a civil war.

But, beyond Haiti's shores, this fresh political crisis is hardly making front page news anywhere. The world is either so used to seeing Haiti descending into political chaos they can hardly call it news or has tragically lost any hope for the country's future.

When Haiti was shaken to its core by a devastating earthquake in 2010, killing more than 200,000 people and displacing another million, the country's deeply entrenched structural and institutional problems were left in plain sight for all to see.

Six years on, those problems haven't gone away. The Haitian state remains utterly unable to provide homes for the 60,000 individuals estimated to be stuck in displacement camps in appalling conditions. Due to poor infrastructure and lack of access to quality medical care, many thousands continue to be affected by the cholera epidemic that began in 2010. And hundreds of Haitian nationals and their Dominican born descendants who have been deported from neighboring Dominican Republic or returned following threats are now living in makeshift camps at the border without essential services such as clean water and sanitation.

Much of it is down to Haiti's political class – who choose to focus their energy on internal power struggles rather than meeting the desperate needs of the Haitian people. That,

alongside a dysfunctional judicial system, means that those responsible for the country's many problems, including scores of human rights abuses, are allowed to walk free.

None of this is new. But the current political crisis risks being the straw that breaks the camel's back – one that could set the country back many decades.

By choosing to hold a country hostage in this electoral crisis, Haiti's political class is playing risky games with the lives and human rights of millions of Haitians.

It is imperative to avoid letting the country fall into an even deeper crisis, and both Haitian political actors and the international community must act in accordance. The respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights in Haiti should be the main compass in any move they make.

As a natural disaster, Haiti's devastating earthquake was unavoidable. But this current crisis could have been averted and must now be solved by placing at the center the human rights of all people under its jurisdiction.

What Haiti needs is that political actors start dealing with the human rights challenges that the country faces. Solutions are not simple, but they are possible. Some require financial resources, some only political will.

Amongst the many concrete steps Haiti must take to move the country forward is the urgent need to invest more resources in facilitating access to adequate housing to those left homeless by the earthquake – including by transforming camps of internally displaced people in proper neighborhoods with full services such as clean water and electricity.

Structural reforms, such as building water and sanitation infrastructure and improving access to quality medical treatment, should reach those most affected by the cholera crisis, including those being returned from the Dominican Republic.

Funds for these initiatives should come both from within Haiti's existing funds through a deep re-think of their budgets but also from the international community, who has already committed – but utterly failed to deliver – resources to fund a 2012 plan by Haiti and the United Nations to eliminate cholera, for example.

The solutions to some of the other deep problems Haiti faces are solely in the hands of politicians. They have the power to ensure, for example, that the country's failing judiciary is put back into shape.

A full overhaul of the judicial system, including the introduction of a new fair and efficient process to select and evaluate judges, make competent defense lawyers available to those without the resources to pay to them and reduce the time people are held in prison before being able to seeing a judge or being tried would be good first steps to ensure justice is a reality for all.

Politicians can no longer rely on the extreme resilience of the Haitian people. They must now focus all their efforts in finding real solutions to the infinite catalogue of human rights problems affecting the country.

Anything less will just set the country back decades.

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<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/problems-rampant-haiti-elect-president-160203134702656.html>

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