

[Haiti Response Shows the Difference Between the EU and a Superpower](#)

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Compare and contrast the initial responses of two "major world powers" to the Haitian earthquake disaster. Within hours of Port-au-Prince crumbling into ruins, the US had sent in an aircraft carrier with 19 helicopters, hospital and assault ships, the 82nd Airborne Division with 3,500 troops and hundreds of medical personnel. They put the country's small airport back on an operational footing, and President Obama pledged an initial \$100 million dollars in emergency aid.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the European Union geared itself up with a Brussels press conference led by Commission Vice-President Baroness Ashton, now the EU's High Representative – our new foreign minister. A scattering of bored-looking journalists in the Commission's lavishly appointed press room heard the former head of Hertfordshire Health Authority stumbling through a prepared statement, in which she said that she had conveyed her "condolences" to the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, and pledged three million euros in aid.

A gaggle of other Commission spokesmen followed, to report offers of help from individual member states, such as a few search and rescue teams, tents and water purification units. We were also told that an official EU representative would be trying to reach Haiti from the Dominican Republic, to stay for a few hours before returning to report what he had found.

Memories might have gone back to December 2004, which saw similarly contrasting responses to the Indian Ocean tsunami catastrophe which cost nearly 300,000 lives. Again, within hours the US took the lead in forming an alliance with Australia, India and Japan, and had sent in two battle groups fully equipped to deal with such an emergency, including 20 ships led by two carriers with 90 helicopters. President Bush immediately pledged \$35 million, later rising to \$350 million. Because they were self-sufficient, the US forces pulled off a stupendously successful life-saving operation, almost entirely ignored by the British media, notably the BBC (whose journalists on the spot were nevertheless quite happy to hitch lifts from US helicopters).

The EU, by contrast, pledged three million euros for the tsunami victims, called for a three-minute silence (three times longer than is customary to remember the millions who died in two world wars) and proposed a "donors' conference" in Jakarta nearly two weeks later to discuss what might be done.

The only real difference between these two episodes is that, in the five years which have elapsed since 2004, the EU has even more noisily laid claim to its status as what Tony Blair liked to call "a world superpower", capable of standing on the world stage as an equal of the US. Anyone who witnessed the dismal showing at Thursday's press conference of the High Representative, which would scarcely have passed muster at a board meeting of the Hertfordshire Health Authority, might well cringe at the thought.