

US imperialism uses Haiti earthquake

by Jim H.

The devastating January 12 earthquake that has killed 150,000 people, injured at least a quarter of a million and left more than a million homeless, is a tragedy the extent of which is hard to imagine. When a horror like this occurs in a country, where its people already live in conditions of brutality and abject poverty, the impact is of disaster is all the worse.

Times like this also bring out the best of humanity. The world wants to help. Teams came in quickly from many countries. People around the world want to give. Money is being given generously to a range of appeals.

History of Haiti

To understand the problems facing this small Caribbean nation, one really needs to have some appreciation of its history and conditions facing the people before the earthquake. Haiti had been a colony of France and during these times was horribly exploited and connected to the African slave trade. Although formal independence came after the slaves' uprising of 1804, French interference continued. The new country was left with a crushing debt as the price for independence. This, together with the parasitic alliance between France and the local privileged elite, ensured that Haiti remained economically backward and dependent, ruled by a succession of brutal regimes. The worst was the period of the Duvalier regime, from 1957 until it was finally deposed in 1986.

The US marines invaded and occupied Haiti from 1915 and remained there till 1934. This period ensured that American corporations would command in the agriculture based economy.

One of the consequences is that when disaster struck, the Haitian state was left so bereft of capacity that it was incapable of responding.

At the same time, the Haitian people have a long history of coping with adversity. They are a strong people, steeled by struggle against brutality and capable of working together in order to overcome devastation and put their country in order again. It is they who will take the lead in overcoming the impact of the earthquake's devastation.

The rise of the progressive Aristide government, after the fall of Jean Claude Duvalier, was the product of long struggle and unity by the people of Haiti. Aristide came with a mission to bring about much needed change, but was overthrown twice by US-backed



military coups, the last time in 2004. Aristide was sent into exile and to this day has not been allowed to re-enter the country.

When the devastating tremor hit, the country suffered under the reactionary US-backed Rene Preval government, which continued the tradition of high level corruption and selling out the country to foreigners. The people have continued to struggle against this. An outcome was the forcing of the UN presence, because the old regime was not capable of continuing in the old way. Haitians continue to struggle against what they regard as a continuing foreign occupation.

Emerging tensions

From the first day of the disaster there have been tensions between Haitians and those they regard as occupiers. There are tensions between the US, France and the UN, as each vies to impose its authority on the ground. Although the UN headquarters had itself been hit and suffered some 40 deaths, it was expected that it would assert its position quickly. It did not happen. Instead the US moved in to take control. In the early days, there was a focus on the military and securing control over the airport and the capital, Port-au-Prince, while the supply of food, water and medical supplies came in second.

Reports of the negative impact of this began to flood in, mostly concerning the turning away of relief shipments, in favour of landing US troops and military equipment. This was behind the growing anger in the streets. Alain Joyandet, French Minister of State for Cooperation, stated that the UN should specify the exact role of the US because "this is not about occupying the country but helping it to recover life."

Sebastian Walker, *Al Jazeera's*

correspondent in Port-au-Prince, reported on January 17 that, while 200 tonnes of aid was stacked up at the airport, getting relief supplies to those in desperate need had been extremely problematic. "This comes down to the complex issue of who is in charge here. The US military has a great deal of control over the number of flights that are landing here," he said. "We heard that a UN flight carrying aid equipment had to be diverted because the US was landing its own aircraft there. The question of just who makes the decision over how to distribute the aid seems to be what is holding up the supplies. At this point, there are thousands camped out in the streets ... These people have been sitting out here for days now, and they say that they have not received the food and aid that is ready to be delivered."

Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) reported that "an MSF cargo plane carrying an inflatable surgical hospital was blocked from landing in Port-au-Prince on Saturday Jan 16, and was re-routed to Samana, in Dominican Republic. All material from the cargo had to be sent by truck from Samana. It added a 24-hour delay for the arrival of the hospital."

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton travelled to Haiti on Saturday, January 16. Reuters reported that before her arrival, Clinton told reporters travelling with her that the Haitian government "had given the US government leeway to meet emergency needs" and that "this could be further expedited if the Haitian parliament passes a decree granting Preval's government more emergency powers – some of which could be delegated to the United States – such as imposing a curfew." When Clinton arrived, the arrival of aid was completely stopped for three critical hours.

Another disturbing feature has been the media based whip up of so-called looting and violence. Tied up to this is the stated need to impose law and order before anything else. Violence and looting has been isolated. But the beat up media campaign, many suspect, will serve as a convenient excuse for ongoing US military presence.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega expressed grave concern over these developments, saying that the United States has taken advantage of the massive quake in Haiti. "What is happening in Haiti seriously concerns me as US troops have already taken control of the airport. It seems that the bases [in Latin America] are not sufficient... There is no logic that US troops have landed in Haiti. Haiti seeks humanitarian aid, not troops..."

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, in his weekly TV broadcast, said that the thousands of American soldiers are being sent to Haiti are "marines armed as if they were going to war. There is not a shortage of guns there ... Doctors, medicine, fuel, field hospitals. That's what the United States should send."

Dan Erikson, a Haiti specialist at the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington-based think tank, was quoted by Reuters as saying that at least in the short term the United States was calling the shots. "Haiti had barely functioning ministries even before the earthquake... The Obama administration can describe this as a partnership, but it is one where one partner is doing all the work and has all the authority,"

It is obvious that the main task now is to save lives, ensure adequate food and water and begin the process of re-building. Everything else comes secondary to this. But the people of Haiti also have the task of getting rid of the occupiers and reclaiming their country.