

Haiti ? aid or colonisation?

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Why is the massive international aid effort in Haiti being interfered with by thousands of US troops?

?These weapons they bring, they are instruments of death. We don?t want them. We don?t need them. We are a traumatized people. What we want from the international community is technical help?action, not words.? Haitian man

The news reports are filled with the sights of more and more US soldiers and UN military being sent to Haiti. Nine days after the tragedy the United States announces that it is sending another 4,000 marines and sailors to the island. Meanwhile journalists from the BBC and other news agencies report from location after location that the Haitians, busy pulling victims out of the rubble with their bare hands or organising makeshift hospitals and kitchens, have seen no foreign aid as yet.

In fact the US and UN militarization has hampered aid efforts not helped them, according to a number of charities. Nor has the much talked about disorder and looting actually occurred, except in a handful of isolated cases ? unless you count as looting starving people taking food from shattered houses and shops to feed themselves and the neighbours.

This malign neglect by the US government, the military and the United Nations big shots too, has cost thousands more lives and extending the terrible suffering of survivors. It proves that the first priority of the USA is not aid, but in fact the military occupation of Haiti.

As the international aid effort began, the US military quickly took control of Port-au-Prince's sole airport. Several thousand heavily armed US troops patrol its perimeter, which one reporter, Sebastian Walker (Al Jazeera), describes as ?more like the Green Zone in Baghdad than a centre for aid distribution?. Inside the airport are vital water and food supplies; Haitians are excluded from entry.

Permission to land is granted ? or denied ? by the USA, with priority given to US military aircraft, and many international aid planes diverted. Five Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) planes with surgical teams and equipment were diverted to Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic (DR), 252 km away. Another MSF plane equipped with an inflatable hospital was rerouted to Samana in the DR, creating a 24 hour delay in its arrival among Haitians. A French flight carrying a complete field hospital was refused landing permission. Two Mexican aircraft carrying life-saving equipment were also turned away. The list goes on. Meanwhile, US aircraft bringing in more soldiers are free to come and go.

Patrick Elie, activist and former minister in the Aristide government, which in 2004 was overthrown in a US-backed coup, stated ?There is no war here. We don't need soldiers as such... The choice of what lands and what doesn?t land... should be determined by the Haitians.?

Apart from the fact that it is subordinated to the US, the UN aid effort too doesn't look very different. ?Men

in uniform, racing around in vehicles, carrying weapons? is how Sebastian Walker describes the UN presence in Port-au-Prince. The great majority of UN personnel are clearly not there to rescue or aid survivors, but to enforce the law. Yet many Haitians were left to dig through the rubble alone, often with their bare hands or the most basic equipment. Outside of the capital, people must mostly fend for themselves.

One BBC news report claimed that a village had to wait four days for aid to arrive because the areas had to be secured first by the military.

Bill Quigley, a US based advocate of human rights in Haiti, accuses the media of looping footage of looting, exaggerating the problem, and giving the impression that Haitians are lawless and beyond help. This in turn 'justifies' the use of heavily armed troops, whereas, Quigley says: "Militarization hinders relief. The goals of humanitarian assistance are radically different from the goals of the military."

In addition, racism is a factor, with the reaction of mostly white troops towards crowds of desperate black people different to how they would react to whites. Even the BBC "whose on-the-ground staff have started to talk of the incredible courage, dignity and community spirit of the Haitians" at first also talked of "mobs" and "gangs" and said security had to come before aid. The demonization of Haitians as 'looters' served the militarization agenda of the US/UN and was clearly meant to do so.

News anchors are constantly asking reporters in Port-au-Prince about the scale of the looting, a single minded obsession that the news has with "Black violence", something that is a reminder of the way that New Orleans was reported in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

What is behind this US race to occupy the Haitian side of the Island? Haiti has a long history of US military intervention and occupation going back to the beginning of the 20th Century, which has contributed to the destruction of Haiti's national economy and the impoverishment of Haitians. Interventions include the CIA-sponsored 1991 military coup, which overthrew of the democratically elected government of President Jean Bertrand Aristide. Only when the ruling military junta was faced with popular insurrection in 1994, were 20,000 US-sponsored 'peace keeping' troops sent to occupied Haiti. The primary aim was not to restore democracy, but to prevent popular forces taking power in a revolution.

Not only has the US and UN done so little themselves to relieve the suffering they have obstructed those from the 15 nation Caribbean Community (CARICOM), from landing aid at Port Au Prince airport. The prime minister of Jamaica, no radical, was forced to protest at his rude treatment by US military personnel when he arrived there. On the BBC World Service an American Jesuit doctor in Haiti reported that Catholic and other US medical aid organisations sending and rescue teams had been told not to go to Haiti. Many had ignored this advice and gone in via the Dominican Republic.

He also said he that he had seen none of the international and US army help whatsoever, nor had he seen any disorder from the Haitian population. Indeed he said they had organised help for themselves, including at his field hospital, forming orderly queues of the injured waiting for treatment and themselves selecting of the worst cases as priorities. He said he was ashamed of the US media reporting scare stories about rampaging mobs and gangs and voice broke with emotion as he said the Haitians were a "noble people", behaving with incredible self-control.

Incredible too is Royal Caribbean Cruises' decision to continue its stopovers in the resort of Labadee on Haiti's northern coast, 129km from Port au Prince. The private resort, leased by Royal Caribbean from the Haitian government, was almost entirely unaffected by the earthquake. The docks, which take huge cruise liners, could have been used to unload relief supplies, whilst the capital's port was out of action. But, says

Royal Caribbean, US military advisers declared it 'unsuitable'.

Some passengers refused to go ashore, one commenting they found it sickening: "I just can't see myself sunning on the beach, playing in the water, eating a barbecue, and enjoying a cocktail while [in Port-au-Prince] there are tens of thousands of dead people being piled up on the streets, with the survivors stunned and looking for food and water."

The scale and composition of the US operation is also telling: 9 ? 10,000 troops, including 2,000 marines, an aircraft carrier, an amphibious assault ship and assorted amphibious vehicles, dock landing ships, coastguard vessels and helicopters ? and one hospital ship. Prior to the earthquake, the number of US military personnel in Haiti was reportedly just 60. Now, combined with UN forces, there will be around 20,000 foreign troops in Haiti ? more per capita than currently occupy Afghanistan!

There can be no doubt that current events amount to a re-colonisation of the state. Hilary Clinton announced ? "we will be here today, tomorrow and for the time ahead." Seizing the 'opportunity' of the earthquake disaster, the current military operation was begun unilaterally by the US, with the excuse that government in Haiti had collapsed. The chief decision making is in the hands of the military Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), not civilian agencies.

SOUTHCOM has its HQ in Miami and controls US military installations throughout Latin America. Its unspoken mission is to ensure the maintenance of subservient national regimes committed to the neoliberal policy agenda. The presence of US in Haiti creates a base from which to pursue the USA's strategic and geopolitical objectives in the Caribbean basin, largely directed against Cuba and Venezuela.

Rather than restore the government destroyed by the earthquake, the US is likely to continue the efforts it has made since the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship (1986) ? to obstruct the functioning of a democratic government, thus fostering Haiti's subservience to US imperialism. Part of this effort will now be to restore United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), whose HQ was destroyed by the earthquake. As already seen, the US and UN military machines are entirely compatible.

A not unimportant motive is Haiti's huge natural wealth. The former President of the Dominican Petroleum Refinery Leopoldo Espaillet Nanita, said shortly before the quake that Haiti has - besides major untapped petroleum resources and copper - important uranium, zirconium and iridium deposits. The latter are rare and valuable minerals used in high tech industrial processes). Typically Nanita opined that these could be used to pay Haitian foreign debt. Meanwhile Bill Clinton and George Soros have suggested that Haiti could become a site for garment factories seeking cheap labour ? sweatshops - or some sort of historical theme park on slavery for US holiday makers. At such proposals satire itself stands disarmed.

In the face of this occupation aimed at plundering the country, socialists and internationalists should demand:

Drop food and medical supplies all over Haiti

An immediate end to military operations

Withdrawal of US and other foreign military vessels from Haitian waters

Troops to disarm and be placed at the disposal of civilian agencies - or leave Haiti

All military vehicles and equipment that can be of use should be placed under civilian control

Control of aid to be in the hands of Haitians themselves

Beyond that, we must be ready to show internationalist solidarity with the efforts of the Haitian people to rebuild their lives and communities, help them organize themselves and mount a struggle against the tiny elite that has tied itself to US imperialism and exploited them for so long ? the same parasites and their masters who created and perpetuated the poverty that turned a natural disaster into a nightmare for millions of Haitians.

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