

# Haiti's tragedy: A crime of US imperialism

Bill Van Auken  
21 January 2010

The immense death and suffering inflicted upon the people of Haiti by the January 12 earthquake has laid bare a massive international crime by US imperialism, which prepared this catastrophe with a century of oppression and is now attempting to exploit the disaster for its own ends.

The estimated 200,000 who have died, the quarter million or more injured and the three million whose homes have been destroyed are victims not merely of a natural catastrophe. The lack of infrastructure, the poor quality of construction in Port-au-Prince and the impotence of the Haitian government to organize any response are determining factors in this tragedy.

These social conditions are the product of a protracted relationship between Haiti and the United States, which, ever since US Marines occupied the island nation for nearly 20 years beginning in 1915, has treated the country as a *de facto* colonial protectorate.

It subsequently backed the three-decade-long dictatorship of the Duvaliers, extending a series of loans that went into the family bank accounts, with the impoverished Haitian people left to foot the bill.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Washington promoted free market policies based on eliminating any safeguards for Haitian agriculture and the privatization of government enterprises and services. The results have been mass poverty, the increasing migration of destitute peasants to the shantytowns of Port-au-Prince, and the hollowing out of the country's government and infrastructure—all conditions that have compounded the social and human costs of the earthquake.

Now, for an entire week, with the whole world watching, millions of Haitians have been left abandoned without medical care, food, water or shelter, as US military cargo planes have ferried in thousands of soldiers and Marines, and US Naval and Coast Guard vessels have mounted patrols off Haiti's shores to prevent anyone from trying to escape.

The absence of any concerted rescue effort is not an accident, nor is the agonizingly slow arrival of food, water and medicine in far from adequate quantities merely a

matter of logistics. The claim that the US military, which was able to pour a quarter of a million troops into Iraq and conquer Baghdad within barely two weeks, could not rush water, food and supplies to traumatized earthquake survivors 700 miles from the US mainland is a contemptible lie.

What is involved is a deliberate and sinister policy characterized by a gross indifference to human life that borders on the genocidal.

Within the Obama administration and the American ruling elite, definite calculations were made. What was the use of saving injured members of an impoverished and chronically unemployed population that US capitalism has long treated as surplus labor? Why dig people out of the rubble only to have to provide them with medical care when Washington is attempting to ration health care within the US itself?

Even as people were still being pulled out alive from demolished buildings, US and UN officials insisted that further rescue operations were hopeless.

At the very least, saving lives has not been the priority of the US intervention in Haiti. Wherever rescue and relief have come into conflict with the primary focus of Washington's efforts—the military occupation of the country—they have taken a back seat.

The cargo planes that are bringing in US military personnel and supplies, it should be noted, fly back empty. There is no desire to bring injured Haitians, who will die without medical care or face the amputation of their limbs for lack of medical supplies, back to the US where they could be healed and their lives saved.

So blatant has the US military operation been that its ostensible allies in Haiti like Brazil, which heads up the United Nations peacekeeping force there, and France have registered protests with Washington. French Secretary of State for Cooperation Alain Joyandet went so far as to call for the UN to clarify Washington's role, saying that the mission was "helping Haiti, not occupying Haiti."

Groups involved in rescue and relief operations have also publicly condemned the US military response.

Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) protested Tuesday that its cargo plane carrying 12 tons of desperately needed medical equipment had been turned away three times from the US-controlled Port-au-Prince airport since Sunday night, despite being assured that it would be allowed to land. Since January 14, five of the organization's planes have been diverted to the Dominican Republic. The result, the group said, is the deaths of hundreds of its patients, and hundreds more injured Haitians are dying daily.

"We don't have any more morphine to manage pain for our patients," said Rosa Crestani, MSF medical coordinator for Choscal Hospital. "We cannot accept that planes carrying lifesaving medical supplies and equipment continue to be turned away while our patients die. Priority must be given to medical supplies entering the country."

Similarly, a Spanish aid group active in Port-au-Prince called a press conference at the Madrid airport Tuesday to denounce the US militarization of the response to the Haitian earthquake and to warn that the "obsession with security" was disrupting efforts to save lives. The group—Intervención, Ayuda y Emergencia—said that it had never encountered anything like it in responding to disasters from Sri Lanka to Turkey.

The real character of the US "aid" effort is expressed in President Barack Obama's choice of his predecessors, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, to lead it. Both have Haitian blood on their hands. The Bush administration orchestrated the 2004 coup that ended with the kidnapping and expulsion of elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, together with the killing of thousands by CIA-trained death squads. Clinton sent troops into Haiti in 1994.

It is the Democrat, Clinton, who in some ways has expressed most nakedly the attitude of the US ruling elite, which is characterized by class hatred for Haiti's oppressed and barely concealed racism.

In media interviews, Clinton has praised the government of President René Préval for its subservience to Washington's demands. He has spoken of Haiti coming out of the earthquake better than before, treating the mass carnage and social disaster as little more than a speed-bump on the road to progress, which is to be measured in increased US investment.

This is Washington's real and malignant purpose. It aims to exploit the country's tragedy in order to impose more direct colonial control and create conditions for US firms to make massive profits by exploiting virtual slave

labor working for starvation wages.

At the same time, it is reasserting its domination in an area that it long regarded as its "own backyard," the birthplace of Yankee imperialism. Facing growing challenges from its economic rivals in Europe and China for trade and investment in the Western Hemisphere, as well as a deterioration of its influence over the states of the region, Washington is utilizing military force to pursue its interests.

The corporate-controlled US media has played a particularly odious role in supporting this process. It has glorified the role of the US military, while deliberately concealing the obstructions that the US occupation forces have placed in the way of rescue and aid work.

At the same time, it has sensationalized stories about "looters"—for the most part, hungry people searching through the rubble for some means of sustenance—in order to provide a pretext for the massive military response. The real criminals under these conditions are not the so-called looters, but the hoarders—those who defend private, profit-making control of vitally needed supplies and those who withhold them from the hungry and homeless people.

The crimes being carried out against the Haitian people are inseparable from the assault on the conditions of the working class and the oppressed masses all over the world, which is driven by the economic crisis of capitalism. The rescue of Haiti's workers and oppressed from the conditions created by over a century of oppression can be achieved only by uniting their struggle with that of workers in the United States and across the globe to put an end to the profit system.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**