

The US is failing Haiti - again

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There is nobody to co-ordinate the most rudimentary relief and rescue efforts.

The US-run aid effort for Haiti is beginning to look chillingly similar to the criminally slow and disorganised US government support for New Orleans after it was devastated by hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Five years ago President Bush was famously mute and detached when the levees broke in Louisiana. By way of contrast, President Obama was promising Haitians that everything would be done for survivors within hours of the calamity.

The rhetoric from Washington has been very different during these two disasters, but the outcome may be much the same. In both cases very little aid arrived at the time it was most needed and, in the case of Port-au-Prince, when people trapped under collapsed buildings were still alive. When foreign rescue teams with heavy lifting gear does come it will be too late. No wonder enraged Haitians are building roadblocks out of rocks and dead bodies.

In New Orleans and Port-au-Prince there is the same official terror of looting by local people, so the first outside help to arrive is in the shape of armed troops. The US currently has 3,500 soldiers, 2,200 marines and 300 medical personnel on their way to Haiti.

Of course there will be looting because, with shops closed or flattened by the quake, this is the only way for people to get food and water. Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world. I was in Port-au-Prince in 1994, the last time US troops landed there, when local people systematically tore apart police stations, taking wood, pipes and even ripping nails out of the walls. In the police station I was in there were sudden cries of alarm from those looting the top floor as they discovered that they could not get back down to the ground because the entire wooden staircase had been chopped up and stolen.

I have always liked Haitians for their courage, endurance, dignity and originality. They often manage to avoid despair in the face of the most crushing disasters or any prospect that their lives will get better. Their culture, notably their painting and music, is among the most interesting and vibrant in the world.

It is sad to hear journalists who have rushed to Haiti in the wake of the earthquake give such misleading and even racist explanations of why Haitians are so impoverished, living in shanty towns with a minimal health service, little electricity supply, insufficient clean water and roads that are like river beds.

This did not happen by accident. In the 19th century it was as if the colonial powers never forgave Haitians for staging a successful slave revolt against the French plantation owners. US marines occupied the country from 1915 to 1934. Between 1957 and 1986 the US supported Papa Doc and Baby Doc, fearful that they might be replaced by a regime sympathetic to revolutionary Cuba next door.

President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a charismatic populist priest, was overthrown by a military coup in 1991, and restored with US help in 1994. But the Americans were always suspicious of any sign of radicalism from this spokesman for the poor and the outcast and kept him on a tight lead. Tolerated by President Clinton, Aristide was treated as a pariah by the Bush administration which systematically undermined him over three years leading up to a successful rebellion in 2004. That was led by local gangsters acting on behalf of a kleptocratic Haitian elite and supported by members of the Republican Party in the US.

So much of the criticism of President Bush has focused on his wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that his equally culpable actions in Haiti never attracted condemnation. But if the country is a failed state today, partly run by the UN, in so far as it is run by anybody, then American actions over the years have a lot to do with it.

Haitians are now paying the price for this feeble and corrupt government structure because there is nobody to co-ordinate the most rudimentary relief and rescue efforts. Its weakness is exacerbated because aid has been funnelled through foreign NGOs. A justification for this is that less of the money is likely to be stolen, but this does not mean that much of it reaches the Haitian poor. A sour Haitian joke says that when a Haitian minister skims 15 per cent of aid money it is called "corruption" and when an NGO or aid agency takes 50 per cent it is called "overheads".

Many of the smaller government aid programmes and NGOs are run by able, energetic and selfless people, but others, often the larger ones, are little more than rackets, highly remunerative for those who run them. In Kabul and Baghdad it is astonishing how little the costly endeavours of American aid agencies have accomplished. "The wastage of aid is sky high," said a former World Bank director in Afghanistan. "There is real looting going on, mostly by private enterprises. It is a scandal." Foreign consultants in Kabul often receive \$250,000 to \$500,000 a year, in a country where 43 per cent of the population try to live on less than a dollar a day.

None of this bodes well for Haitians hoping for relief in the short term or a better life in the long one. The only way this will really happen is if the Haitians have a legitimate state capable of providing for the needs of its people. The US military, the UN bureaucracy or foreign NGOs are never going to do this in Haiti or anywhere else.

There is nothing very new in this. Americans often ask why it is that their occupation of Germany and Japan in 1945 succeeded so well but more than half a century later in Iraq and Afghanistan was so disastrous. The answer is that it was not the US but the efficient German and Japanese state machines which restored their countries. Where that machine was weak, as in Italy, the US occupation relied with disastrous results on corrupt and incompetent local elites, much as they do today in Iraq, Afghanistan and Haiti.

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P.S.

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<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/patrick-cockburn-the-us-is-failing-haiti-ndash-a-gain-1869539.html>