

# Haiti Needs Urgent Relief and Justice, Not Military Occupation

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On January 13 Haiti was hit by a massive earthquake that is feared to have killed 2 lakh people, rendered over 3 lakh homeless and devastated the country. Aid has been late to arrive and has only now begun to trickle in. Despair, hunger, disease and desperate rioting stalk Haiti in the wake of the calamity.

The quake is a natural calamity; but centuries of colonial and imperialist loot are responsible for rendering Haiti so intensely vulnerable to such a tragedy. After the decimation of its indigenous people, Haiti had been populated by black slaves, who in 1804 achieved the world's first slave revolution against colonial France. Haiti was punished for this remarkable achievement with 'reparations' paid to France and sanctions imposed by France as well as the US. Haiti was impoverished by these reparations as well as by the loans from French and US banks required to pay the reparations. From 1915 to 1934, Haiti suffered US occupation, and from 1957 to 1986, Haiti was ruled by brutal US-backed dictators 'Papa Doc' and 'Baby Doc' Duvalier.

US neoliberal policies crippled Haiti's food self-sufficiency to create a market for US products. Popularly elected leaders in Haiti were deposed in US-sponsored coups at the first sign of any pro-people policies. One such President - Jean-Bertrand Aristide - was deposed first in 1990, to usher in "market reforms", whereby Haiti was forced to end its self-sufficiency in rice production and become a captive market for US rice. The devastated farmers became cheap fodder for sweatshops US industrialists. Aristide was reinstated in 1994 by Clinton on the promise of more neoliberal policies. He was again elected President in 2000 but deposed in a coup sponsored by the Bush regime in 2004.

It is the neoliberal policies that have forced Haitians to leave the countryside and work in sweatshops, living in packed slums in the city - which were the worst hit during the quake. Following the 2004 coup, the UN, "international community" and various NGOs have had a free run in Haiti, virtually acting as private service providers in place of the crippled public sector. Thus, when the quake hit, there was no Haitian infrastructure in place and the foreign players were focussed on getting their people out of the country.

Today, in the wake of the quake, Haiti is all set to witness a repeat of the history of callous exploitation that crippled it in the first place. Already, there are disturbing indications that the US, in the name of aid, is all set for a virtual military occupation of the country. Haiti's airport is in US control and US troops are pouring into Haiti - offering a double-edged sword - both relief and 'security'. The Obama government has appointed a bipartisan delegation led by former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush towards recovery efforts in Haiti.

The conservative US think-tank Heritage Foundation has commented that "Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, and America is the most generous." In the light of Haiti's history, and especially the recent role of Clinton and Bush in the impoverishment of Haiti, such posturing by the US is the height of hypocrisy. A remark by the Heritage Foundation the very next day after the quake is revealing of the real agenda behind the US military-driven relief plan: "In addition to providing immediate humanitarian assistance, the U.S. response to the tragic earthquake in Haiti

earthquake offers opportunities to re-shape Haiti's long-dysfunctional government and economy as well as to improve the public image of the United States in the region."

It seems that the Pentagon-led relief drive has an agenda similar to the right-wing military coup in the Honduras and the establishment of US military bases in Columbia - to step up US presence in a region which has seen the rise of several powerful challenges to US hegemony and "public image" in recent years. As in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US military will not confine itself to an agenda of humanitarian relief: it will also have a key repressive role, with an eye to possible long-term presence. Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen in a Pentagon briefing communicated as much, when he said, "The initial intent is to strategically place some of our soldiers so that they can help with that relief distribution...And then obviously we're all focused on the security piece, as well...We very much hope to stay ahead of that, but recognize that there are possibilities that we need to plan for."

Meanwhile countries like Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Mexico have rushed humanitarian and medical aid, skilled medical volunteers and quake relief experts to Haiti, even as leaders like Castro, Chavez, Ortega and Morales have expressed apprehension about the heavy deployment of US troops in Haiti. France, which like the US is a former occupier of Haiti, has also accused the US of 'occupation' in the name of relief.

The process of justice and genuine relief for Haiti can only begin when it is recognised that the US, France and other erstwhile colonisers owe Haiti - not relief, but reparation; and when all attempts of imperialism and 'disaster capitalism' to capitalise on the quake and profit from Haiti's plight are resisted. Even as we extend solidarity to the people of Haiti, we must demand that Haiti's debts be written off and Haitians who are compelled to immigrate to the US in the wake of the quake be granted 'Temporary Protected Status' and not harassed, humiliated and hounded out.

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