

Washington turns its back on Haitian catastrophe

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25 September 2004

Nature has dealt a cruel blow to the people of Haiti, deepening the intense suffering and oppression that centuries of imperialist domination have inflicted upon the Caribbean nation's impoverished population.

Tropical Storm Jeanne has buried Gonaives, the birthplace of Haiti's struggle to cast off slavery and colonialism 200 years ago, in a sea of mud. Over 1,700 bodies have been recovered and dumped in mass graves. Thousands more people in the city as well as in cut-off rural areas are presumed dead.

Tens of thousands have been left with nothing to eat. The stench of rotting corpses and raw sewage hangs over the city. The lack of clean drinking water poses a mounting threat of deadly cholera or typhoid epidemics sweeping through the population.

Like all so-called natural disasters, the impact of the storm is a function not merely of wind and rain, but of social conditions. The poorest nation in the hemisphere, with 80 percent of the country's population living on less than \$150 a year, Haiti is the least capable of resisting the impact of such a storm. Moreover, the deforestation of the country's hills, a centuries-old destructive process driven by rural poverty, has created the conditions for deadly floods and mudslides.

In response to this humanitarian catastrophe, Washington issued the following statement, posted on the web sites of both the American embassy in Port-au-Prince and the US Agency for International Development:

"On September 21, 2004, US Ambassador James Foley issued a disaster declaration due to the damage caused by Tropical Storm Jeanne. In response, USAID [US Agency for International Development] is providing \$50,000 to CARE to distribute hygiene kits, cooking sets, blankets, water containers and other relief supplies to those most affected by the floods. USAID has dispatched a two-person team from the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance to help coordinate the United States relief

efforts with local disaster officials. USAID has also secured an aircraft through Air Serv International to provide aerial assessments and transport of personnel and relief supplies.

"The most effective way to help is to make cash contributions to humanitarian organizations that are conducting relief operations."

The total aid package, valued at \$60,000, drew a shocked response from around the world. Foreign government officials and directors of humanitarian aid agencies rubbed their eyes in disbelief at the miniscule figure.

Washington's response stood in stark contrast with that of other nations. The government of Venezuela, for example, made an immediate offer of \$1 million, while the European Union pledged \$1.8 million. Trinidad approved an allocation of \$5 million for assistance to Haiti, though its government does not recognize the US-installed regime in Port-au-Prince.

The US offer amounted to about 25 cents each for the more than 250,000 people left hungry and homeless by the storm. It would barely count as a mid-sized corporate contribution to the Bush-Cheney campaign fund.

One can only guess at the grotesque discrepancy between Washington's obscene aid offer and the sums allocated to organize the ouster of the country's elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, last February. Working in collusion with paramilitary thugs from Haiti's former dictatorships, US officials kidnapped and forcibly evicted Aristide from the country, and then brought in some 1,500 Marines in to prop up a pro-US puppet government. The cost of this operation must have run into the hundreds of millions.

When he announced the US intervention in February, Bush declared that the US military was occupying the country to "bring order and stability to Haiti." He said his government believed it was "essential that Haiti have a

hopeful future.”

Life since the US-backed coup has been a nightmarish ordeal for the people of Haiti, marked by deepening poverty and continued brutality at the hands of the right-wing paramilitaries who still hold sway in large parts of the country.

The reaction to the devastation of Tropical Storm Jeanne is the clearest demonstration of the real attitude of US imperialism to the fate of the Haitian people.

Two days after its \$60,000 insult to Haiti, the USAID amended its offer, pledging \$2 million and sending an additional \$153,000 in supplies. The press reported that the shift was in response to widespread international criticism.

The money is still grossly inadequate. Faced with far less severe damage in the US from Hurricane Ivan, the Bush administration rushed last week to put together a package of \$5 billion in relief.

What convinced Washington to raise the ante in Haiti? It is hardly credible that it was suddenly moved by the horrible suffering of the storm’s survivors. After all, US imperialism is creating thousands of corpses every month in Iraq, and does not even bother to estimate the number of its victims.

Nor is it simply a matter of embarrassment over the wealthiest nation in the world—with a history of repeated military occupations of Haiti—being shunned for its callous indifference.

Rather, the Bush administration reacted to a perceived threat to US interests. With Europe and countries like Venezuela and Trinidad—both of which vehemently opposed the overthrow of Aristide—offering 20 to nearly 100 times as much aid as the US, the Bush administration feared that the damage done by Jeanne could spread from the charnel house of Gonaives to the arena of world politics. It saw that its open contempt for the people of Haiti could have consequences, threatening Washington’s claim to undisputed hegemony in its “own backyard.”



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