

Humanitarian crisis worsens in Haiti

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The death toll in Haiti continues to rise following a series of devastating hurricanes in the Caribbean. Official government figures have placed the number dead between 600 and 1,000, with more than 800,000 people—half of them children—in need of emergency aid throughout the country. Some 60,000 people in the hard-hit port city of Gonaïves remain in temporary shelters.

Haiti has been struck by four powerful storms in the span of three weeks. On Sunday, Hurricane Ike, then a Category 4 storm, dumped a foot of rain on Hispaniola. Much of Haiti remained flooded from Tropical Storm Fay, Hurricane Gustav, and Hurricane Hanna, which made landfall September 1.

The country faces a crisis of staggering proportions. A huge segment of the population—800,000 people in a country of 8.7 million—is now in desperate need of basic humanitarian assistance, according to international aid agency UNICEF. If this proportion were extrapolated to the United States, with a population of some 300 million, the number of people in need of aid would be greater than the combined populations of the Los Angeles and New York City metropolitan areas, or the entire combined state populations of Michigan, Illinois and Indiana.

Before the peak of the Atlantic hurricane season, many Haitians were already facing the threat of starvation because of spiraling food inflation in the past year. Because the vast majority of the population lives on less than \$2 a day, and the devastation of crops has pushed food prices sharply higher, an even greater humanitarian catastrophe now looms.

Other countries in the Caribbean, including Cuba, the Bahamas, and Jamaica, have also sustained widespread damage to housing and infrastructure. However, Haiti has suffered losses on a level several magnitudes higher than its regional neighbors. The disparity is a reflection of the social anarchy to which the population has been subjected over a number of decades at the hands of US

imperialism.

The US has invaded Haiti twice in the last decade, and has for many years pursued a campaign of destabilization against the country. The US, along with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, succeeded in keeping Haiti economically crippled over the past three decades via trade restrictions and other predatory policies.

In 2004, the US, France, Canada and the UN backed the overthrow of the country's first democratically elected president and installed a right-wing junta. Immense popular opposition was brutally put down by both foreign troops, including US Marines, and privately funded paramilitary death squads.

Much of the destruction in the country is concentrated in Gonaïves, which was inundated with mudslides and flooding last week. The city is situated on the coast of the Artibonite valley, Haiti's low-lying and wet agricultural region where much of the rice upon which the country depends is grown and where thousands of families subsistence farm.

Because of its location in the floodplain of mountain rivers, Gonaïves is particularly vulnerable to repeated floods. Surrounding hillsides—long ago deforested by former colonial occupiers—have remained largely naked by the desperately poor to make charcoal, which is commonly used in cooking in the absence of fuels and electricity.

Haitian Environment Minister Jean-Marie Claude Germain told Agence France-Presse that the country's plant cover was currently estimated at less than 2 percent. "In neighboring Dominican Republic, plant cover is estimated at 30 percent and the army looks after the environment sector, contrary to Haiti where there's no environment policy," Germain told the news agency.

Without groundcover, the hillsides are prone to massive mudslides and flash floods during hurricane

season. As a result, valleys are inundated with mudflows. Haiti's slums and shantytowns—comprised mainly of perennially damaged buildings, shacks built of scrap metal and plywood, and very little in the way of physical infrastructure—are overwhelmed. When Tropical Storm Jeanne struck Haiti in 2003, more than 3,000 people were killed by flooding, the majority in Gonaives.

The flooding triggered by Hurricane Hanna collapsed crumbling bridges and roads leading into the city last week. Gonaives residents, who had received little government forewarning and no assistance in evacuating, were trapped on rooftops or forced to flee into the mountains. At this writing, some 250,000 people remain stranded in the city and tens of thousands in surrounding towns are similarly cut off from aid shipments.

According to the aid agency Doctors Without Borders, floodwaters in the region have receded enough for survivors to begin making their way to emergency clinics. Hundreds have arrived to be treated for starvation or jungle rot from walking for days in fetid water.

In contrast, it is worth noting that the Cuban government undertook a massive preventive evacuation of 2.6 million people in anticipation of Hurricane Ike—nearly a quarter of the country's population. The state housed some 400,000 evacuees in more than 2,300 government shelters. Although the country was hit directly, only five deaths were attributed to the storm.

Indeed, according to an Associated Press report September 10, fewer than two dozen Cubans have been killed by hurricanes in the past decade. The petty-bourgeois nationalist character of the Castro regime notwithstanding, these figures are attributable to Cuba's central planning of essential safety measures and state control of emergency supply lines and materials.



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