

US provides more troops than aid

Death toll mounts in Haiti

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More than 48 hours after a devastating earthquake leveled much of the city of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, millions are without shelter, power, food and water. The estimates of the death toll range from 50,000 (the Red Cross) to ten times that number, and with each passing hour, the higher figures seem more and more likely.

Aid workers have rushed to Haiti from dozens of countries—from as far away as China to neighboring Cuba and the Dominican Republic. However, the vast number of victims of the quake overwhelms the rescue effort. Countless people, living and dead, lie under the rubble, and in many neighborhoods desperate family members equipped only with hand tools are trying to dig them out. Dozens of aftershocks pose an additional threat of further collapses and landslides.

Most public buildings in Port-au-Prince have been destroyed or are so heavily damaged they are now unusable. This includes eight hospitals, and medical care is being delivered mainly from the ruins or from field hospitals set up in tents. There were press reports of patients lying on the ground outside hospitals, with IVs in their arms that had been attached by their relatives, not medical personnel. In one hospital, a US television reporter was told that the only medical procedures being performed were amputations, despite the pervasive shortage of anesthetics and drugs.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “most of the damage appeared to be concentrated around Port-au-Prince, a teeming city of 2 million that sits like a hive of gray concrete that creeps up a mountainside rising out of the Caribbean. The homes are mostly made of cheap, porous concrete made with sand from nearby quarries. In the aftermath of the quake, entire big-box

apartment blocks had collapsed along roads carved into the hills.”

Geologists have been warning for more than a decade of the likelihood of a major quake in southern Haiti, where the fault line between the North American and Caribbean tectonic plates runs. In 2008, the mayor of Port-au-Prince estimated that 60 percent of the capital’s buildings would be unsafe in the event of a major quake.

But in a country with a Gross Domestic Product of only \$7 billion, there were no public funds available for retrofitting and quake-proofing structures. Even before the earthquake, conditions of life in Haiti were the worst in the Western Hemisphere. Two-thirds of the population subsist on less than \$2 a day, and water, power and communications systems are at primitive levels.

In the aftermath of the quake, there has been no serious coverage in the US media of the social and historical roots of the tragedy, for which American capitalism bears principal responsibility.

For its part, the White House has responded with hypocritical and sanctimonious declarations, along with a pittance of aid. President Obama declared, in his latest public statement pledging \$100 million to Haitian relief, that assistance to Haiti is a top priority of his administration. The actual figures give the lie to this preposterous claim. The \$100 million US pledge amounts to barely one hour’s spending for the US war machine—and less than some of the bonuses being paid out this month to Wall Street bankers and speculators.

Despite the claims of the US government, the United Nations and the American media, there is no massive mobilization of international assistance for the ravaged country. What is being sent to Haiti is a drop in the bucket, and even this limited assistance is useless

without a distribution network to get it to the people in need.

Most major powers are making little effort to disguise their indifference. Germany, for instance, offered a derisory \$2.2 million in aid. France sent in 100 soldiers from its island possessions in the West Indies, Martinique and Guadeloupe. None of the bourgeois governments in Latin America is sending more than a few dozen rescue workers or token planeloads of emergency supplies.

The hundreds of rescue workers who have arrived in Port-au-Prince are dwarfed in number by the military forces deployed or on their way. The 9,000 troops in the UN-led MINUSTAH peacekeeping force will soon be matched by an equal or even larger number of American troops, coming by air and sea.

The first US vessel to arrive off Port-au-Prince was the US navy cutter Forward, stationed at Guantánamo Bay. The aircraft carrier Carl S. Vinson, with a crew of about 6,000, arrived on Thursday, and the amphibious assault ship USS Bataan, with 2,000 Marines on board, set sail as well. The destroyer USS Higgins is to arrive Saturday. An advance party of 100 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division was due to arrive in the Haitian capital Thursday, preparing the way for a full brigade of 3,500 US paratroopers.

The Pentagon's Southern Command reopened the airport at Port-au-Prince to round-the-clock flight operations after repairing the control tower, damaged by the quake, and a US Coast Guard C-130 cargo jet arrived Thursday with a delegation of UN officials to take charge of the relief effort and the peacekeeping force, whose leadership was apparently killed when the quake collapsed their headquarters building.

So dominant is the US military role that White House spokesman Robert Gibbs was compelled to deny Thursday that Washington was exercising de facto governing power in Haiti. The Haitian government, he declared, is still in charge in Port-au-Prince, although local press reports suggest that not a single government agency or building is currently functioning.

If one adds up the naval, air and ground forces deployed or dispatched by the Pentagon, the total is well over 12,000. At the same time, the US government has sent only 300 doctors—fewer than the number of Cuban healthcare workers already on the ground in Haiti (344), and less than half the number of volunteers

working there from Doctors Without Borders (800).

There is no doubt that among the American people there is enormous sympathy for the plight of the Haitian people, facing their second natural catastrophe in three years, after the battering of their country by four hurricanes in the summer of 2008. Contributions of both money and goods have flooded US charities.

But for the US government, the representative of the American financial aristocracy, the issue is one of defending imperialist interests in the Caribbean, both against the threat of unrest within Haiti itself, and the threat of any rival power taking advantage of the crisis to secure a foothold in a region long under nearly exclusive US domination.

According to a Reuters report, “senior US officials indicated their understanding that relief and reconstruction efforts will act as something of a test of US and multinational effectiveness and capacity.” Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton described the effort as “a real opportunity as well as a challenge.”

The working class in the United States and internationally must demand a massive program of emergency relief and long-term reconstruction for Haiti, including the allocation of at least \$100 billion in resources and the mobilization of thousands of doctors, healthcare and rescue workers. The amounts being discussed in Washington and at the United Nations amount to a death sentence for the people of that devastated country.



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