

Haiti: Rescue effort ended as people still emerge from rubble

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The Haitian government together with United Nations authorities announced over the weekend the official end to efforts to rescue people trapped in the rubble from the January 12 earthquake, even as survivors were still being pulled out alive.

The latest rescue by a French team came Saturday, when 24-year-old Wismond Jean-Pierre was rescued, apparently unharmed, from the ruins of the Hotel Napoli Inn in Port-au-Prince. Two other people, including an 84-year-old woman, were found Friday after being buried alive for 10 days.

At least 132 people have been rescued since the earthquake. In its aftermath, some 67 separate rescue teams consisting of over 1,900 members poured into Haiti. All but 10 of them have now departed.

The halt to the rescue effort provoked anger and dismay both in Haiti and the US, where families of students believed buried in the rubble of the Hotel Montana started an online petition to demand that the searches continue.

The suspension of the search-and-rescue operations appeared to be part of a broader agenda that is being pursued by Washington and the United Nations, which is aimed at shifting the focus from the immediate catastrophe confronting millions of Haitians to a rebuilding effort that will be driven by and subordinated to profit interests.

Meanwhile, what remains of Haiti's government issued new data illustrating the scale of the catastrophe that has engulfed the country. Marie Laurence Jocelyn Lassegue, the communications minister, said Saturday that 120,000 bodies have already been recovered and buried in Port-au-Prince alone. This does not include those buried by family members and, of course, the many more still trapped in the rubble of the Haitian capital, not to mention those killed outside the city.

Earlier, the government had estimated the total death toll at over 200,000.

Haitian officials also said that more than 193,000 people are known to have been injured in the earthquake in the capital, and that 11,000 buildings had been completely destroyed, with more than another 32,000 damaged.

An estimated 1.5 million families have been left homeless by the earthquake.

Nearly two weeks after the earthquake struck, the provision

of aid to the suffering people of Haiti remains shockingly haphazard and agonizingly slow. While supplies are reportedly piling up at the Port-au-Prince airport, which, together with the city's port facilities, have been taken over by the US military, they are still not reaching the majority of those affected.

According to the United Nations, there are over 500 makeshift camps set up in parks and vacant lots across the capital, some with as many 15,000 people in them. While UN officials said that they had "assessed" the needs of 350 of these encampments, only about 200 of them have received any aid in the form of food and shelter.

Haiti's prime minister, Jean-Max Bellerive, went further, charging Saturday that 90 percent of the people in the camps have received no aid whatsoever.

Where distribution sites have been set up for handing out food and water, they have drawn lines of thousands of people.

Provision of shelter has become a critical priority, as efforts are made to transfer people to sites out of the city and protect them from expected rain, which would dramatically increase the danger of disease spreading in the crowded camps of homeless survivors in Port-au-Prince. Public health officials have warned that conditions are ripe for cholera, malaria, dengue and other infectious diseases claiming many more victims.

While United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon declared after the disaster struck that there had to be an effort to rush "tents, tents and more tents" to Haiti, it took a full week before the first plane carrying a few hundred tents was allowed to land. Thus far, only three such planes have been given permission to land, bringing in a total of 20,000 tents, a small fraction of what is needed.

Reporters for the US National Public Radio reported over the weekend that bodies still litter the streets of Haiti, many of them "fresh," indicating that injuries and disease stemming from the original disaster are claiming a new set of victims. Some medical aid groups have warned that the death toll resulting from the lack of adequate medical supplies and care could eclipse that of the quake itself.

Aid groups have blamed the delays in the arrival of aid on the priorities set by the US military for getting armed troops into the country first, with food, water and medicine critically

needed in the first days to save lives taking a back seat.

Parallel to getting “boots on the ground,” the US Navy and Coast Guard have mounted a blockade of Haiti’s waters—an operation known as “Vigilant Sentry”—to intercept and return any Haitians attempting to escape the disastrous conditions in their homeland by fleeing in boats to the US. US officials have set up a detention camp at the US Naval Base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba capable of housing over 1,000 Haitians, should they evade the blockade. An immigration prison in south Florida has also been cleared to prepare for a possible exodus.

The US Ambassador to Haiti, Kenneth Merten, has gone on Haitian radio to deliver announcements in Creole that anyone attempting to escape the country will be caught by the US military and forcibly returned.

Meanwhile, the government of Jamaica announced last week that it is gearing up to receive Haitian refugees fleeing the disaster.

“They will be processed, confined within designated facilities, required to undergo medical screening and treatment, where necessary, and given temporary accommodation and care until they can be returned to their homeland,” Jamaican Information Minister Daryl Vaz told a press briefing last week.

Jamaica’s decision to admit—and detain—Haitian refugees came after a brief stop-over in the country by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, following her trip to Port-au-Prince. The United States has reportedly offered the right-wing government of Prime Minister Bruce Golding millions of dollars to pay for the expenses of the Jamaica Defense Force in handling the anticipated refugee flow.

The arrangement appears to be a perverse form of “contracting out” Washington’s Haitian problem. While the US military has set up its detention camp at Guantánamo, the Obama administration is no doubt loathe to have tens of thousands of Haitians pouring into the facility, whose very name is infamous around the world for the unlawful detention and torture of alleged suspects in the US “war on terror.”

The US government’s focus will shift on Monday to Montreal, where the Canadian government is hosting a ministerial level meeting to discuss long-term plans for Haitian development. US Secretary of State Clinton will attend, together with foreign ministers Bernard Kouchner of France and Celso Amorim of Brazil, along with representatives of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and a number of other governments and international financial and aid organizations.

The head of the IMF, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, said on the eve of the Montreal meeting that Haiti “needs something which is big, not only a piecemeal approach, but something which will be much bigger, to deal with the reconstruction of the country, some kind of Marshall Plan.”

There is little indication, however, that the world’s capitalist powers are prepared to do anything “big” that will benefit the masses of the Haitian people. The approximately \$2.6 billion in

foreign aid that has flowed into the country since 1984 has left Haiti the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, with two-thirds of the population living on less than \$2 a day.

The bulk of the money has flowed into the pockets of the country’s wealthy elite—Haiti is also the most socially polarized nation in the Americas—together with contractors and NGOs.

The ravaged country still owes the international lending institutions nearly \$1 billion. So far, the IMF has offered only another loan of \$100 million, which is to be interest free only to the end of 2011, after which the country would face even larger debt payments. For its part, the World Bank has said that it would institute a five-year moratorium on Haitian debt payments, rather than canceling the debt outright.

As for reconstruction plans, these center principally on rebuilding Haiti as an export platform based on investments by corporations seeking to reap profits off of the exploitation of Haitian workers paid virtual starvation wages.

Just before the earthquake, the US Congress had set the stage for such a development by granting preferential access to US markets for Haitian garment factories. The aim is to create enterprises that are competitive with those in China, by keeping wages below Chinese levels.

Maintaining Haiti as a cheap-labor haven for American capital has long been a fundamental US policy. In both 1991 and 2004, Washington and the CIA orchestrated bloody coups to oust the country’s elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had advocated an increase in the minimum wage and implemented such a raise in 2003. In 2004, after Aristide was overthrown, abducted by US special forces and flown into exile in South Africa, the wage hike was immediately revoked. It remains the lowest in the hemisphere.

Last August saw two people killed and a number wounded in clashes between thousands of demonstrators and the Haitian police, backed by UN peacekeepers, after the parliament voted to raise the minimum wage from the equivalent of \$1.75 to \$5 a day, and President René Préval refused to implement the increase. Préval acted on the demands of the country’s oligarchy and foreign investors, insisting that raising wages would destroy jobs and hurt the economy.



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