

Criticism mounts over US response to Haiti disaster

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Two weeks after the devastating earthquake in Haiti, there is growing criticism of the US for undermining rescue and relief efforts by focusing almost entirely on the military occupation of the Caribbean nation.

On Monday, the Haitian government raised the confirmed death toll to 150,000, making it the worst natural disaster in the Americas on record. Officials said the number does not include Jacmel and other outlying areas, and anticipated that tens of thousands more bodies will be found.

Meanwhile, the UN estimates that as many as 800,000 homeless people are staying in cardboard and canvas encampments set up around the capital of Port-au-Prince, while some 235,000 have used the government's offer of free transport in a mass exodus from the capital.

Quake survivors are still receiving little or no food, water, health care and shelter. While officials say there have been no major outbreaks of disease yet, health experts warn of the spread of diarrhea, dengue fever and malaria as the already dilapidated sanitation system is overtaken by debris and waste. Speaking at a conference of international donors in Montreal Monday, the country's prime minister, Jean-Max Bellerive, said hundreds, if not thousands of victims have had amputations, but there are virtually no prosthetic devices in the country.

The US has flooded nearly 20,000 troops onto the island and on ships nearby. It controls the airport and whatever ports are still usable. From the onset of the disaster, aid groups and other countries have complained that vital aid could not land because the US military had priority, promoting the French official in charge of humanitarian aid to say, "This is about helping Haiti, not about occupying Haiti."

On Sunday, Guido Bertolaso, the head of Italy's Civil Protection Agency, denounced the US-led effort as "pathetic," and compared it to the response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Bertolaso, a cabinet-level official who won praise for coordinating relief efforts after the 2009 earthquake in the central Italian city of L'Aquila, said of the US response, "It's a truly powerful show of force, but it's completely out of touch with reality. They don't have close rapport with the territory and they certainly don't have a rapport with international organizations and aid groups," he said.

"[W]hen confronted by a situation of chaos," Bertolaso told Italy's RAI television, the US tends "to confuse military intervention with what should be an emergency operation, which cannot be entrusted to the armed forces. We are missing a leader, a co-ordination capacity that goes beyond military discipline."

Haiti was "a terrible situation that could have been managed much better," Bertolaso complained, adding, "When there is an emergency it triggers a vanity parade. Lots of people go there anxious to show that their country is big and important, showing solidarity." Organizations such as the UN, he said, felt the need to "make a bella figura in front of the television cameras rather than focusing on what underneath the debris." He singled out former President Bill Clinton, saying he made a show of helping with water supplies "but went back after a day."

These criticisms were shrugged off by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who insisted that the US was leading an "enormously committed and effective international effort that could not succeed without additional military assets." She pointed to the arrival of the US Navy's 1000-bed hospital ship, the USNS Comfort, but failed to mention it did not arrive until

eight days after the quake, while tens of thousands were dying due to the lack of medical resources in the disaster-ridden country.

Haitian groups in the US have also expressed their concern over the slow response to the disaster. Elsie St. Louis-Accilien, from Haitian Americans United for Progress in Queens, New York, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “There has been a lot of money donated and a tremendous raising of national and international awareness about the plight of the people in Haiti. Our most immediate concern, however, is the ground logistics to immediately get the aid distributed. People are dying from secondary infections and there must be better coordination to stop more people from dying. I’ve spoken to the Red Cross, and what is needed most is medicine, food and water, and that has been slow forthcoming to the people that need it most.

“Security seems to be the priority instead. People are not seeing on television what is being done on the ground. The priority has to be to save as many people as possible. There has to be a push to get the help that has been promised.

“These are the priorities, not more armed forces. Aid has been delayed because there is not enough space at the airport because the US has been landing military planes. They have also warned people not to leave the island. But I know for a fact that people are not leaving in flocks to come to the US illegally; instead they are leaving Port-au-Prince to relocate to cities on the countryside.

“We all have families there. Some lost mothers and siblings. I have family members that are missing. We are concerned about our families under the rubble, getting them out, burying our dead and healing the sick. Up to yesterday they were still pulling live people out. We were sorry to hear that the rescue effort was being halted and that international teams were returning. The Haitian people on the ground will continue to search, even though we don’t have the machinery and the power and the means. The people will dig with their hands.”

A principal concern of the US government has been to prop up the US-installed Préval regime and prevent a repeat of the events in Nicaragua in the 1970s, when official indifference in the aftermath of the earthquake in Managua contributed to the overthrow of the long-standing American-backed Somoza dictatorship. At the

same time, the US has sought to block desperate Haitians from crossing over to the US, warning that all refugees would be turned back by the US Coast Guard.

Over the weekend, the Haitian government, along with the UN, called off efforts to rescue people trapped in the rubble, even though survivors continue to be found. The decision underscores the moves by the US to quickly move to the “reconstruction” stage, which involves longstanding plans to transform the country into a cheap labor platform for international garment manufacturers.

On Monday, the UK-based food aid organization Oxfam called for the cancellation of the country’s \$800 million in foreign debt, saying an insistence on repayment would be “both cruel and unnecessary.” It also warned that urgent action was needed to support Haitian farmers and “prevent a man-made food crisis exacerbating the hardship faced by the people of Haiti.”

The opening up of Haiti’s rice market, demanded as a condition of IMF loans during the 1990s, all but eliminated the country’s rice production. The bulk of the vital staple is now imported from the US. The impoverishment of the rural population contributed to the flood of hundreds of thousands into the slums of Port-au-Prince, where their ill-constructed homes became death traps.



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