

Troops fire on starving crowds in Haiti

Patrick Martin
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Troops under United Nations command have opened fire on crowds of hungry Haitians seeking food, an ominous sign of impending confrontation between the people of the earthquake-wracked country and the armed forces dispatched there under the auspices of the imperialist powers.

On Monday, Uruguayan troops, part of the UN peacekeeping force deployed here since 2004, fired rubber bullets at people who crowded around food trucks, eventually pulling out and leaving sacks of rice to be fought over.

The next day, Brazilian troops proceeded more aggressively, using pepper spray and tear gas to hold off a crowd seeking food at a tent camp on the grounds of the devastated presidential palace. People ran from the spray coughing and with their eyes streaming.

Two tanks were brought up to menace the crowds when they began to reform, although Fernando Soares, a Brazilian army colonel, told the press: “They’re not violent, just desperate. They just want to eat.”

One soldier loaded a shotgun as the crowd watched, but did not fire. “They treat us like animals, they beat us, but we are hungry people,” one Haitian, Muller Bellegarde, told an American reporter.

The World Food Program (WFP) was delivering 107 cubic tons of rice, oil and beans to the palace camp, enough to feed 20,000 people for two weeks. As the trucks rolled up, thousands came out of their tents and began lining up, but the queues soon became disorderly as it became clear that there was not enough food for all who needed it. Another man told Reuters, “We are too many. Two trucks are not enough for us. They will fight, and the soldiers will shoot and fire gas.”

Violence also broke out in the seaside town of Jacmel, according to a report in the *Wall Street Journal*, after initially peaceful protests over the scarcity of tents for earthquake survivors.

Force was used as well by Haitian police at a food-distribution site in Cite Soleil, the largest and most

impoverished section of the capital city. Police swung sticks and clubs to drive back the crowd.

While Haitians seeking food and scavenging in the rubble have been portrayed as “looters” by the media, and targeted for repression by both foreign troops and Haitian police, it was so-called looters who found a man buried in the rubble of a building on Rue de Miracle in downtown Port-au-Prince Tuesday. They brought US soldiers with the necessary equipment to pull the man, Rico Dibrivell, 35, out alive. He had a broken leg and severe dehydration, but said he had been trapped for 12 days rather than 14, falling victim to an aftershock rather than the original 7.0 quake.

On Wednesday, a teenage girl was pulled alive and apparently unhurt, though severely dehydrated, from beneath another smashed building. Coming 15 days after the main tremor, this marks the longest known survival of an earthquake victim in modern history. US and other rescue efforts were called off at the weekend.

The total number of American military personnel in Haiti, including those on ships just offshore, rose to 15,400 by Tuesday. One third of these are soldiers on the ground in and around Port-au-Prince, with the bulk of them from the 82nd Airborne Division, an elite unit that specializes in combat, not logistical support.

The heavy-handed US military presence has generated considerable criticism. Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia boycotted a donors’ conference in Montreal to protest the US occupation of the country.

Former Cuban President Fidel Castro wrote in *Granma*, the country’s official newspaper, that the focus on US military deployment had blocked entry of doctors and medical supplies. “Send doctors, not soldiers,” he wrote. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez declared, “The U.S. government is taking advantage of a humanitarian tragedy to militarily take over Haiti.”

These sentiments were expressed, not just by regimes long at odds with Washington, but by officials of longtime US allies France and Italy. A French cabinet official, Alain Joyandet, said in a radio interview January

19 that the role of the U.S. in Haiti should be clarified. "It's about helping Haiti, not occupying Haiti."

The top Italian official dispatched to Haiti, Guido Bertolaso, the civil protection minister, said Monday that the US intervention had been "pathetic.... 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."

Clearly referring to the photo-op appearance by former US President Bill Clinton, who passed through the island and briefly unloaded water bottles at the airport, he said, "Unfortunately there's this need to make a bella figura in front of the television cameras rather than focusing on underneath the debris.... Some individuals were putting on a vanity show for the television cameras instead of rolling up their sleeves."

Such comments clearly stung, as shown by the comments by Clinton's wife, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Speaking to a group of State Department employees, she declared, "I deeply resent those who attack our country, the generosity of our people and the leadership of our president in trying to respond to historically disastrous conditions after the earthquake. Some of the international press either misunderstood or deliberately misconstrued what was a civilian and military response, both of them necessary in order to be able to deliver aid to the Haitians who desperately needed it."

Haitian President René Preval, who has been virtually invisible to the people of his country for the past two weeks, emerged to denounce suggestions that the occupation of his country by foreign troops was a threat to its sovereignty. At a press conference with Jose Miguel Insulza, secretary-general of the Organization of American States, he rebuffed a question about the occupation, saying, "We are talking about people suffering and you are talking about ideology."

A French reporter asked why US troops were controlling flights into the Port-au-Prince airport. Preval replied: "You need to run the airport, you need technical help and they offered it to us. I really can't understand why the need for that is so difficult to accept."

Preval also announced that Haitian legislative elections, previously scheduled for February 28, would be postponed indefinitely.

The major initiative of Preval's government is a program to relocate 500,000 people from Port-au-Prince to villages outside the capital region, but there have been few takers among those living in the rubble. A reporter for

the French news agency AFP visited Croix des Bouquets, one of the relocation sites, and described it as "a vast, gravel wasteland with just a few people hanging about hoping for work."

Meanwhile an extraordinary denunciation of the Obama administration's conduct in Haiti was published in the *Wall Street Journal*, issued by three New York City doctors, Soumitra R. Eachempati, incoming president of the New York State Chapter of the American College of Surgeons, and Dean Lorch and David Helfet, orthopedic surgeons and colleagues of Dr. Eachempati at the Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York City.

Their statement appeared under the headline, "Haiti: Obama's Katrina, Many post-quake deaths could have been prevented." The three doctors, who were among the first to reach Haiti after the quake, wrote that the delays imposed by the US military on relief groups entering the country "proved tragic. Upon our arrival at the Haiti Community Hospital we found scores of patients with pus dripping out of open fractures and crush injuries. Some wounds were already infested with maggots. Approximately one-third of the victims were children. Most of the patients already had life-threatening infections, and all were dehydrated. Many had been waiting in the hospital compound for days without water, antibiotics or even pain medicine. The hospital smelled of infected, rotting limbs."

They continued: "The U.S. response to the earthquake should be considered an embarrassment. Our operation received virtually no support from any branch of the US government, including the State Department. As we ran out of various supplies we had no means to acquire more.... Later, as we were leaving Haiti, we were appalled to see warehouse-size quantities of unused medicines, food and other supplies at the airport, surrounded by hundreds of US and international soldiers standing around aimlessly."



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