

Obama's guilty silence on Haiti

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In his State of the Union speech Wednesday night, President Barack Obama barely mentioned the immense catastrophe unfolding on America's doorstep, with the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Haitians and millions more left injured, hungry and homeless.

One might think, given the unprecedented scale of death and suffering—not to mention the presence in the US of well over a million people of Haitian descent—that Obama would have noted the gravity of the situation, or even begun by asking the Congress to join him in a moment of silence for the multitudes who have died.

In fact, he did nothing of the kind. He was more than three-quarters of the way through his speech before even mentioning the Haitian events. And, following remarks that were dominated by cynicism and repeated winks and nods to the millionaire politicians who constituted his audience—Republicans and Democrats alike—the solemnity and compassion called for in addressing the suffering of the Haitian people would have seemed entirely out of place.

Instead, Obama exploited the Haitian catastrophe as a means of extolling US power and virtue. He lumped US actions in Haiti together with the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the threats against North Korea and Iran and the boast that his administration has killed hundreds of Al Qaeda “fighters and affiliates,” more even than under Bush.

“America takes these actions because our destiny is connected to those beyond our shores,” he said. “But we also do it because it is right.”

Further milking the disaster for the purposes of jingoism, Obama emphasized that the work of American rescue teams who had gone to Port-au-Prince prompted “chants of ‘USA! USA! USA!’ when another life was saved.”

This attitude may be appalling, but it is entirely in character for the US president. Washington's

“humanitarian” mission in Haiti is indeed of a piece with its wars in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia and its targeted assassinations of alleged terrorists in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere.

The Obama administration responded to the Haitian disaster with a military intervention and occupation. Its first priorities were not providing food, water and medical assistance to the quake's survivors, but getting thousands of combat-equipped soldiers and Marines into the country and setting up a naval blockade around it to deter any Haitians from attempting to flee the catastrophe for refuge in the US.

The result was that aid needed in the critical first 72 hours after the earthquake was withheld at the cost of thousands of more lives. Planes carrying medical supplies and equipment were denied permission to land at Port-au-Prince airport, which was seized by the US military, in order to keep the runway clear for planes bringing in troops.

Doctors Dean Lorch, Soumitra Eachempati and David L. Helfet, three New York City surgeons who set up the first functioning operating room in Port-au-Prince following the disaster, have issued blistering statements spelling out the human cost of these priorities and describing the US response in Haiti as “Obama's Katrina.”

They explained in articles written for the *Wall Street Journal* and CNN that they were ready to fly into Haiti the day after the earthquake, but were denied permission from the US military to land until late on the fourth day after the disaster. Even then, they were among the first medical relief groups allowed into the country.

Upon arrival, they found that “disaster management in Haiti was nonexistent.”

At the Haitian hospital, they confronted a mass of patients with wounds dripping puss and infected with maggots; people who had been “waiting in the hospital

compound for days without water, antibiotics or even pain medicine.”

With the hospital lacking basic surgical supplies, they organized for their colleagues in New York to send what was needed, but a first shipment of supplies received no protection and was hijacked, while a second flight carrying supplies, as well as a new medical team to replace them, was denied permission to land. Because of the failure to deliver these supplies, they said, many of the patients they did operate on were likely to die from infection.

As they left Haiti, the doctors recounted, they “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.”

What is exposed in this account is a response by the US government that can only be described as criminal. Decisions were made at the top of the Obama administration and in the Pentagon that troops would be sent first, instead of humanitarian relief, with the foreseeable result that many victims would not survive.

This was not a matter of negligence, but of deliberate calculations. There was no great urgency in rescuing poor people who were severely injured and whose care would require the expenditure of resources. This coldblooded response is not an aberration, but is in continuity with the century of oppression that US imperialism has visited upon Haiti, replete with repeated military occupations and the backing of brutal dictatorships that have kept three-quarters of the population living in abject poverty.

There was, on the other hand, a clear determination to exploit the Haitian earthquake as pretext to carry out a major military operation.

In the first instance, this deployment is aimed at securing the interests of the US and the native oligarchy upon which its long-time domination of the country rests against the threat that the disaster would give rise to a revolt from below.

Moreover, the show of military force in a country located between Venezuela and Cuba has an obvious attraction from the standpoint of asserting US hegemony in the region.

In this sense, the military occupation of Haiti fits in with Washington’s backing of last year’s coup in Honduras and the recent deal to open up new US

military bases in Colombia. The coming to office of the Obama administration has signaled a renewed drive by US imperialism to employ its military might in pursuit of the profit interests of US-based banks and corporations in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Washington’s response to Haitian disaster has exposed the political essence of the Obama administration. The man who came to office a year ago as the candidate of “hope” and “change” heads a government that is ruthless in its commitment to the defense of America’s ruling financial elite and prepared to utilize the escalation of American militarism and the sacrifice of countless human lives, both at home and abroad, to that end.



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