

French government backs US occupation of earthquake-stricken Haiti

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After the January 12 earthquake that devastated Haiti, the French government has moved to quell political opposition in Europe to the US military occupation of Haiti.

The US intervention has blocked critical medical and food supplies, including from organisations such as Doctors Without Borders, as Washington concentrated on consolidating its grip on Haiti. The earthquake's death toll stands at over 200,000, with 250,000 injured and millions made homeless. It has also boosted imperialist plans to turn Haiti into a cheap labour resource of wage slaves on starvation wages in the garment industry. (See: "Reconstructing Haiti" on starvation wages).

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who has built his foreign policy around repairing Franco-American relations after his predecessor Jacques Chirac opposed the Iraq war at the UN, quickly repudiated Cooperation and Overseas Territories Minister Alain Joyandet's now-famous reproach to US operations in Haiti: "It's about helping Haiti. It's not about occupying it."

Joyandet's comments were echoed by Guido Bertolaso, the head of Italy's Civil Protection Agency. Bertolaso described the US operation in Haiti as "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." Bertolaso added: "when confronted by a situation of chaos, [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."

The official French position came in a presidential communiqué, which asserted: "The French authorities [are] fully satisfied with the cooperation" with Washington. The communiqué added they "are keen to recognize the exceptional mobilization of the United States in favour of Haiti and the essential role they are playing on the ground."

At the same time, the French government is making preparations to expel Haitian immigrants back towards their

devastated, occupied homeland. On January 13, Immigration Minister Eric Besson halted expulsion procedures against Haitian *sans-papiers*, but for only 3 months—even less than the 18 months accorded by the US government. For many immigrants this entails a return to famine and homes reduced to rubble. Besson has rejected appeals by support organisations for residence rights to be granted to all Haitians in France.

Reports indicate that even these wholly inadequate announcements of relief are not being followed. On January 22 at the Val-de-Marne *préfecture* near Paris, it was business as usual. The government office issued an expulsion order to two Haitians whose passports were not in order. The state prosecutor's office said, "The Haitians have a month to leave France."

The Sarkozy government fully supports the basic lie the US uses to justify its military occupation of Haiti: the central problem in Haiti is security. Speaking on January 23, in preparation for the Montreal conference on Haiti, he tried to use the catastrophe to build up European security forces: "Security is also the ability to react in an emergency ... like the Haitian tragedy." He added, "This is why France advocates the creation of a European civil security force ... which could be deployed very rapidly."

Assertions by Sarkozy, Prime Minister François Fillon, and Besson of "an old friendship" and "profound historical and cultural ties" between France and its former colonial possession are hypocritical and sinister.

While France had ceded the position of leading imperialist power in Haiti to the US by the beginning of the twentieth century, it has historically played a crucial role in keeping the country in poverty. Napoleon—who came to power on the basis of suppressing the masses' influence in political life that had led France's revolutionary government to recognize Haiti's independence and free its slave population in 1794—dispatched troops in an attempt to reimpose slavery. These forces were defeated by Haitian slaves led by Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. However, in 1825, with 14 French warships threatening Port-

au-Prince, the restored French monarchy of Charles X demanded that Haiti repay 150 million francs, later reduced to 90 million, in exchange for its own freedom. The indemnity was a crushing blow to Haiti, which did not finish repaying it until 1947.

The US Marines Corps, which ruled Haiti from 1915 to 1934, did not disturb the arrangement, and France's role at key points in Haiti's history has been to support the US. French support for US-backed dictatorships in Haiti was symbolized by "Baby Doc" Duvalier's decision to flee to France after he lost power in 1986. French troops assisted the US occupation of Haiti after the 2004 US-backed coup against elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Currently, the French government makes no criticisms of the US Navy and Coast Guard's blockade of Haiti's waters—an operation known as "Vigilant Sentry"—to intercept and return any Haitians attempting to escape. Nor has it protested against the fact that the US has set up a detention camp at its naval base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba capable of housing over 1,000 Haitians, should they try to evade the blockade.

Indeed, there is every reason to believe that the French bourgeoisie welcome it. As the treatment of Haitian and other *sans-papiers* before the earthquake would suggest, the French authorities are doubtless relieved that the naval blockade will prevent a wave of refugees from escaping Haiti to France's Caribbean possessions, including nearby Guadeloupe and Martinique.

Social conditions on those islands are already very tense. One year ago there was a 44-day general strike in Guadeloupe. At the time, the French daily *Le Monde* commented that the Guadeloupe general strike "aroused the most strongly felt anxiety at the top of the state." It explained: "The government dreads that the measures in favour of purchasing power [i.e. the demand during the Guadeloupean general strike for increased wages] which might be agreed in the islands could be used, in metropolitan France, as a reference point ..."

The Haitian community in France's Caribbean possessions is badly oppressed. A 2006 report published by the *Migrants Outre-Mer* (Overseas Migrants) association in conjunction with the *Collectif Haïti de France* (Haiti Collective in France) says that, of the 1.5 million Haitians living abroad, 100,000 are on French territory: 40,000 in metropolitan France, 30,000 in Guyana and 20,000 in Guadeloupe.

Of the Haitians in Guadeloupe, 5,000 are *sans-papiers*. On the island, the number of expulsions is "massive: estimated at an average of 2,000 per year. When an illegal immigrant is arrested the person receives an 'obligation to leave French territory (OQTF) within a month.'" This OQTF was suspended in metropolitan France on appeal, but not in

Guadeloupe.

In general, Haitians in Guadeloupe earn very low wages and are subject to discrimination. The report notes: "Some schools ask for the parents' identity documents in order to enrol their children, which very much frightens the parents who don't have residence rights."

The report reveals that an agreement has been in negotiation between France and Haiti to enable the French state more easily to expel Haitians living in France and the French Caribbean possessions. Such agreements have also been made with former French African colonies.

In 2006 the GARR (Support Group for Refugees and Repatriated People) published damning figures on the treatment meted out from January to November 2005, to Haitian political asylum seekers in France and the overseas departments (DOM). Of 4, 718 applications in the DOM only 2.3 percent were accepted. "Most Haitians arrive by boat. They go through the island of Dominica, 80 kilometres to the south of the coast of Guadeloupe." In 2004, in order to get to Guadeloupe from Haiti a migrant had to pay a trafficker \$2,000 to \$3,000, plus \$300 to \$400 on arrival. Doubtless, the earthquake has sent these payments sky high.

In his paper "Illegal immigration in Guadeloupe: the case of the Haitians," published October 2005, academic Louis-Auguste Joint notes the oppression of Haitian immigrants, who are often scapegoated for social problems. In 2004, at the time of the US- and French-backed ouster of elected Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—an ouster whose associated death toll he estimates at 10,000—only ten of 2,005 political asylum-seekers were granted asylum.

In Guadeloupe the OFPRA (France's Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons) issues a paper (*récepissé*) to asylum-seekers while they are awaiting the verdict on their applications. The decision is taken in Paris. Workers are allowed residency, but are still legally forbidden to work pending the outcome of their application. They then become prey to exploitative employers, working 18 hours a day for €20 or €30 in banana and sugar cane plantations.



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