

Four weeks after earthquake

Haiti: hunger sparks growing protests

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On Sunday, Haiti saw one of its largest protests since the January 12 earthquake, as four weeks after the disaster, frustration with continuing hunger and homelessness mount.

Thousands of demonstrators, most of them women, marched through the streets of Petionville, a Port-au-Prince suburb, denouncing the local mayor, Lydie Parent, for hoarding food for resale and not distributing it to the hungry.

A significant amount of food aid has been channeled into Haiti's informal markets, sold at elevated prices and clearly yielding a profit for some officials who are in charge of its distribution.

Congregating in front of the local municipal building, the demonstrators chanted "if the police shoot at us, we will burn everything," Reuters reported.

"I am hungry, I am dying of hunger," one of the marchers told the news agency. "Lydie Parent keeps the rice and doesn't give us anything. They never go distribute where we live."

Petionville, up the mountain from the capital, has traditionally been the preserve of Haiti's economic elite. Shanty towns sprung up around the walled mansions of the country's businessmen and politicians, however. Since January 12, one of the principal watering holes of the well-heeled, the Petionville Club, has been transformed into the capital's biggest homeless encampment, where more than 40,000 quake victims have sought refuge on the club's nine-hole golf course.

Sent in to police this yawning social divide are 360 US combat troops from the 82nd Airborne Division, who have set up camp around the club's swimming pool and restaurant.

Last Friday, former US President Bill Clinton was also met by protests upon his return to Haiti. Hundreds gathered outside the judicial police headquarters, the makeshift headquarters of the Haitian government, during Clinton's visit there with the country's President René Préal.

"Our children are burning in the sun. We have a right to tents. We have a right to shelter," one of the protesters, Mentor Natacha, 30, a mother of two, told Agence France Presse.

Hundreds of others demonstrated outside the US embassy.

Clinton, who was named the United Nations special envoy to Haiti last May, was forced to acknowledge the failure of

sufficient aid to reach the majority of the Haitian people nearly a month after the earthquake. "I'm sorry it's taken this long," he said. "I'm trying to get to what the bottlenecks are."

Clinton also visited the Gheskio medical clinic in Port-au-Prince, announcing the donation of various supplies by his foundation. However, the clinic's director, Jean William Pape, told AFP that the facility is overwhelmed and has not received adequate aid.

"It has been huge on us because in addition to providing the care to our HIV/AIDS patients, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases, we have to take care of around 6,000 refugees," said Pape. "We don't have enough supplies. We don't have tents for them and the rainy season is coming and we live in a flood area."

According to press reports, barely 10,000 tents of the 200,000 requested by the Haitian government have arrived in the country. Clinton said that another 27,000 would come in the next week, still grossly inadequate to meet the massive need.

The ex-US president felt compelled to deny that he had been sent in as a de facto colonial governor of the devastated Caribbean nation. "What I don't want to be is the governor of Haiti," said Clinton. "I want to build the capacity of the country to chart its own course. They can trust me not to be a neocolonialist, I'm too old."

Whatever Clinton's personal role, his attempt at self-deprecating humor cannot hide the fact that Washington is playing precisely the role of a neocolonial power in Haiti. Within hours of the earthquake, the Pentagon launched an operation that has thus far seen the deployment of some 16,000 troops and the assumption of US military control over the country's airports and port facilities. US naval warships and Coast Guard vessels have imposed a blockade off Haiti's shores, ensuring that any of the earthquake's victims seeking to escape to the US will be swiftly repatriated.

Colonel Gregory Kane, the operations officer for US Task Force Haiti, said that US troops would remain in Haiti as long as necessary. "We are in Haiti as long as needed and are welcomed by the government of Haiti," he said.

Aid groups and government officials in Europe and Latin America have sharply questioned the US militarization of the response to the Haitian disaster. Many blame Washington's

making the deployment of US troops—rather than the provision of desperately needed aid—the top priority in the first critical days following the earthquake for increasing the death toll.

The militarization of aid and obsession with security remain clearly in evidence nearly a month after the earthquake. This was reflected in a report by the AFP on food distributions over the weekend. “Surrounded by dozens of heavily-armed US soldiers, old ladies and even young men struggled under the burning tropical sun to carry away sacks of rice,” the news agency reported. “In another part of the city a detachment of around a dozen Argentine troops, some enclosed in an armored personnel carrier equipped with a turret gun, escorted a small flat-bed truck laden with food to its destination.”

For its part, the Haitian government has appeared largely powerless and has grown increasingly unpopular with the Haitian people. Graffiti reading “Down with Préval,” the Haitian president, has begun appearing with increasing frequency on walls in the capital.

President Préval, who has been virtually unseen by the population since the quake hit, announced over the weekend, while meeting with officials from the neighboring Dominican Republic, that the estimate of the number of people killed in the earthquake has risen to a quarter of a million, while 250,000 homes have been destroyed and more than a million people are facing an urgent need for temporary shelter with the rainy season fast approaching.

Speaking with the media on Saturday, he urged the Haitian population to remain calm. “We understand the difficulties faced by the people who sleep outside, homeless, we understand the frustration about food and water distribution being difficult,” he said. “But it is in discipline, in solidarity, in patience that we will be able to solve the problems that confront us.”

The real class position of the Haitian regime was evident in an interview given by the country’s Prime Minister to the Colombian daily *País*. “The ones who lost the most in Haiti on January 12 weren’t the poor, it was what was left of the middle class,” he said. “Because the poor didn’t have houses before, and they still don’t have houses. The middle class, which had stayed in Haiti, which had made some effort to build a house, a small business, lost everything.”

The fact that the poor “didn’t have houses” has been cited by relief organizations as a significant factor in the present crisis, in that they have no means of rebuilding and nowhere to go. According to the Catholic relief group Caritas International, 70 percent of those displaced by the earthquake in the capital did not own their own homes before the disaster struck.

More than half a million of these people have left Port-au-Prince, with the encouragement of the government, to return to rural areas from which many of the capital’s poorer layers had migrated and where they still have relatives.

The reason that people had migrated to the capital in the first place, however, was that they could not sustain themselves

through agriculture. Now these areas have seen a massive influx of hungry people for which there is little or no food. Relief supplies have yet to arrive in the rural areas, and there is growing fear that farmers will begin using their seed supplies for food, endangering next year’s harvest and leaving even greater hunger.

Meanwhile, the *Miami Herald* reported Saturday that there is a new crisis with the emergency medical flights that bring severely injured Haitian children to US hospitals for treatment, and that once again it is costing lives.

Last month, the military suspended the flights after Florida Governor Charlie Crist sent a letter to the Obama administration questioning whether the federal government would assume responsibility for the costs being incurred at the state’s hospitals, where most of the young Haitian victims had been brought.

After a growing public outcry over the suspension, the Obama administration agreed to foot the bill through the US Department of Health and Human Services.

But now, the department has imposed such stringent eligibility requirements for the medical flights that few patients qualify, and those who don’t are dying in Haiti.

“They want paperwork. We don’t have paperwork,” Miami Children’s Hospital Dr. William Muinos, who heads the pediatric unit of a field hospital in Port-au-Prince told the *Herald*. “They don’t have passports. They don’t have IDs. They don’t have homes. They don’t have anything.”

The paper cited the case of a 15-year-old girl, Whitney Constant, who was told she would be taken to Florida for treatment, but then was stopped by the government requirements. Three days after she was to have been flown out, she contracted gangrene, forcing doctors to amputate the lower half of one leg and the foot of the other.

Another 14-year-old child died of a pulmonary embolism last Tuesday. Doctors said she would have survived had she been evacuated. “She was told she would leave,” said Dr. Muinos. “Within 24 hours, that promise was denied.”

“The Department of Health and Human Services lifted the embargo on flights but made the criteria so strict that you can’t get anybody in,” said Elizabeth Grieg, director of the field hospital. She told the *Herald* that since the flights resumed only nine of the hospitals’ patients have been accepted, six of whom had been scheduled to go out before the military suspended them last month.



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