

Canada's prime minister uses Haiti visit to promote "hard power"

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper visited Haiti for two days last week, becoming the first G-20 leader to visit the country since the January 12 earthquake that devastated Port-au-Prince and its environs killing more than 250,000 people.

The timing of Harper's visit was not fortuitous. He concluded his trip February 16, less than 24 hours before French President Nicholas Sarkozy arrived in the Caribbean island nation.

The Conservative government has been anxious to assert a leading role in the relief and reconstruction of Haiti, so as to advance the interests of Canada's corporate elite in the Caribbean—long a major site of Canadian overseas investment—and assert Canada's claim to be a major power.

The Conservatives have also seized on the Haitian relief effort, which has been enthusiastically supported by the media and all the opposition parties, as a means of reviving popular support for their more "robust" foreign policy, the centerpiece of which has been the leading role played by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in the Afghan counter-insurgency war.

In an action closely coordinated with Washington, Canada deployed 2,000 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel and two navy battleships to Haiti in the days immediately following the earthquake—one of the largest overseas CAF deployments since World War II. And on January 25, the Canadian government hosted an international conference in Montreal on rebuilding Haiti. The conference focused on schemes to make Haiti a haven for cheap-labor offshore assembly and garment-manufacturing operations.

The majority of the CAF troops have been stationed in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital. But 200 soldiers were deployed to Jacmel, a town of about 30,000 people on Haiti's south coast, and another 675 to Léogâne. In these two towns, which both lie less than 40 kilometers from Port-au-Prince, the Canadian military has assumed the role of principal coordinator of humanitarian aid. For several weeks the CAF ran the Jacmel airport, assuming, albeit on a smaller scale, the type of governmental authority US troops have exercised in Haiti's

capital and beyond.

Despite the size of the CAF deployment and the enormity of the humanitarian crisis, Canadian aid reached Haiti only slowly. It took more than ten days for the CAF to initiate relief efforts in Jacmel and medical assistance only began to be provided in Léogâne on January 29.

While the press has obligingly promoted the Harper government's claim that Canada has mobilized massive resources in support of the relief effort, Ottawa has in fact given Haiti less than \$100 million in emergency aid. It also pledged to match dollar-for-dollar individual Canadians' contributions to the relief effort, but stopped matching contributions when they reached \$128 million. All told, the Canadian government will provide about 1.5 percent of the estimated \$14 billion that will be required to rebuild the shattered country.

During Harper's Haitian visit—which even the Canadian press conceded was largely a photo op—he toured the CAF-led relief operations in Jacmel and Léogâne, as well as meeting with Haitian officials in Port-au-Prince.

In a speech before CAF personnel in Léogâne, Harper lauded "hard power" or military might and denounced the Liberal governments of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin for having promoted the notion that Canada could significantly influence world affairs by being a leading practitioner of "soft power." (Harper notwithstanding, this did not stop the Chretien and Martin governments from ordering the CAF to play a leading role in the 1999 NATO war on Yugoslavia and the current Afghan war or from initiating, at the beginning of the last decade, a major expansion and rearmament of Canada's military.)

"The entire planet," declared Harper, "has been able to witness that Canada is now a major actor when it's time to intervene in natural disasters." This was only possible, he claimed, because his government had purchased four massive C-17 transport planes to ferry supplies to Afghanistan and with a view to future Canadian military interventions overseas.

“There was a time when that kind of heavy-lift aircraft didn’t fit Canada’s ‘soft-power’ policies,” said Harper. “But our government bought them for the hard-power requirements of today’s world. Now we’re using them for relief work. So what is the moral of the story? To do soft power, you need hard power, you need a full range of capabilities.”

Harper’s remarks echoed much of the commentary in Canada’s press. *The Globe and Mail*, for example, ran editorials on January 21 and 22 arguing that a strong military is essential for humanitarian relief.

Canada’s government and elite are cynically seeking to exploit and manipulate the deep sympathy of ordinary Canadians for the anguish of the Haitian people. They are acutely conscious that the CAF intervention in Afghanistan, despite a massive media campaign to whip up public support with claims that the CAF is fighting for democracy, has been popularly discredited, with a majority of Canadian favoring a quick end to the mission. Because of this opposition, both Harper’s Conservatives and the official opposition Liberals, led by Afghan war enthusiast Michael Ignatieff, have been forced to pledge to end the CAF’s combat role in Afghanistan by the end of 2011.

Canada’s intervention in Haiti is seen as a means of legitimizing a policy of imperialist intervention and reviving public support for the CAF.

It is also rooted in the Canadian bourgeoisie’s longstanding economic and strategic interests.

Historically, the Caribbean has been a major site of Canadian overseas investment. Canadian banks have been major players in the region since the beginning of the twentieth century and the Bank of Nova Scotia currently lays claim to the title of Haiti’s largest foreign bank.

Alongside the US and France, Canada played a major role in the 2004 coup against Haiti’s elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide. Working in tandem with Washington and Paris, Canada opposed any action to oppose a right-wing rebellion led by fascist-minded former Haitian army officers, insisting that Aristide must forsake the presidency as the first step to any “solution” to the Haitian crisis. Subsequently, the CAF’s elite special operations unit, Joint Task Force-2, seized control of the Port-au-Prince airport while US Marines kidnapped Aristide and put him on a plane for exile in the Central African Republic.

After Aristide’s ouster, 500 CAF troops joined US military personnel in policing the capital, while US and Canadian diplomats constructed a new “US-friendly” Haitian government. Canadian police officers, drawn from the RCMP and other police forces, were later tasked with helping train a more professional—i.e., dependable—police force that could be used to quell social unrest and otherwise enforce the chasm that exist between Haiti’s tiny elite and the mass of the population.

Following the 2004 anti-Aristide coup, the Canadian government sponsored the creation of a Haitian-Canadian Chamber of Commerce and eliminated tariffs and quotas on Haitian exports of textile and apparel goods, so as to promote Canadian companies’ efforts to use Haiti as a source of sweatshop labor. Gildan, a Montreal-based garment manufacturer, now has three Haitian suppliers, helping it to become, according to a business commentator, “among the most cost-competitive in the industry.”

Canadian mining companies, meanwhile, are exploring the possibility of exploiting the island country’s mineral and cheap-labor resources.

Recent Canadian governments—including the current Conservative government—have identified Latin America as central to Canada’s foreign policy because of Canada’s present and potential economic ties to the region, but also because Ottawa hopes to strengthen Canada’s partnership with Washington by proving “helpful” to the US.

Traditionally Washington has viewed Latin America as its backyard, but the growth of European Union and even Chinese investments and influence in the region as well as the rise of Brazil is threatening US dominance.

In an interview on the eve of Harper’s Haiti visit, Canadian Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon argued that Canada’s role in Haiti will help offset any potential loss of influence in Washington due to the planned pullout of Canadian troops from Afghanistan. “Canada is helpful,” said Cannon. “We chart our foreign policy and in many regards we’re like minded with the Americans.”



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