

Bush, Clinton visit Port-au-Prince

Washington dictates terms to devastated Haiti

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Former US presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton visited the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, in advance of a donors' conference in New York City called to coordinate international aid and investment in the country in the wake of the devastating January 12 earthquake.

President Obama named Bush and Clinton co-chairs of the US fundraising campaign after the quake. The joint visit combined public displays of concern, in photo-op visits to a refugee camp and two local businesses, and talks with Haitian president René Préval and other officials.

Television coverage showed Bush, who had never before set foot in Haiti, shaking hands with quake survivors with a fixed smile on his face, visibly uncomfortable. He spoke woodenly, telling reporters that his purpose was to see firsthand the destruction caused by the quake and "remind the American people there is still suffering and work to be done here."

The Bush-Clinton visit to the refugee camp on the Champ de Mars, next to the presidential palace, was a high-security affair, with dozens of US Secret Service agents, Haitian police and blue-helmeted UN peacekeeping troops surrounding them and Préval as they shook hands with earthquake survivors.

The attitude of the Haitian people to the visitors was a mixture of hostility and indifference. Bush, in particular, is hated for the US role in the 2004 coup that removed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and exiled him to South Africa. Clinton, while posturing as a "friend" of Haiti, is identified with a policy of opening the Haitian market to foreign competition that devastated the country's agriculture. He is now the UN special envoy to Haiti.

About 100 supporters of former president Aristide staged a protest outside the national palace, burning tires and an American flag. They chanted slogans like "Return Aristide! Down with Préval! Down with Bush!" One leader of Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party, which is now barred from running in the elections, told the Associated

Press, "Those people have a lot of money. They could do something for Haiti, but they haven't done it."

A quake survivor, 35-year-old René Pierre, who is homeless, told one US reporter, "The visit is like no visit at all. They walked inside, it's to show off." The AP reported on a street-corner debate in the Bel Air slum: "Neighbors crowded into a narrow alley behind partially collapsed buildings to shout their opinions: Bush is bad, Préval ineffective and Clinton disappointing as UN envoy."

The *Miami Herald* described the scene as Bush, Clinton and Préval entered the refugee camp: "Quake survivors screamed at the three leaders, shouting details of the losses they suffered.... Others took a moment to criticize their own president's leadership. 'President Préval has never come to see us before!' screamed Myrlande Saint-Louis, who lives in the Place Mosolée camp the presidents visited. 'Now because Bush is here he comes? Now he wants to see us!' "

One of the principal purposes of the Clinton-Bush visit was to prod Préval into taking action on a land ownership dispute that has hamstrung efforts to relocate many of the quake survivors. Private landowners in the Haitian elite have been reluctant to make land available, demanding more compensation than the government was in a position to provide. Restrictions on foreign land ownership, rooted in Haiti's origins 200 years ago in the slave revolt against French plantation owners, have hampered the activities of both foreign NGOs and multinational corporations.

Clinton is a particularly assiduous promoter of the conception that foreign investment, particularly in the garment industry, is the key to Haiti's economic revival after the quake. During his visit, he repeatedly dropped hints that unspecified Asian and Brazilian companies were just waiting for procedural obstacles to come down before they set up shop in Port-au-Prince and other areas.

Préval responded to the pressure by issuing an executive order forcing Haitian landowners to turn over property

under eminent domain, with financial compensation, to be used by aid organizations and foreign investors.

The initial focus will be the establishment of a new neighborhood called Pole Nord, north of the capital city, where some 150,000 people are to be relocated. These will primarily be residents of 29 low-lying camps (among the 425 refugee encampments), which are in particular danger of mudslides once the rainy season begins next month. One Préval aide said that the government would spend \$40 million to buy the land, and \$86 million to provide shelter for those being moved out of Port-au-Prince.

The first heavy rains took place last week and quickly flooded many of the most vulnerable camps. Protests broke out over the inaction by the government in leaving camp residents to suffer, with several thousand people taking part. The demonstration turned in an anti-US and anti-UN direction, with protesters shouting, “We can’t take this any more!” They marched toward Toussaint Louverture Airport, now under US military control, but were barred by club-wielding Haitian riot police.

In the course of their visit, both Bush and Clinton preached capitalism as the solution to the appalling conditions of life in Haiti. At a press conference, Bush declared, “By stimulating the entrepreneurship we believe small business will help lead this nation’s recovery.” Clinton called for revision of the US legislation known as HOPE II to expand duty-free access for Haitian garment manufacturers to the US market, claiming “we can create 100,000 jobs in short order.”

Clinton made it clear that these jobs, if they actually were created, would represent a diversion of production to Haiti from other low-wage countries in Asia and Latin America. In other words, Haitian workers would be employed at the expense of workers in China, Korea, Mexico or Brazil.

While hailing the virtues of free trade and free flow of foreign capital into Haiti, Clinton was compelled to admit earlier this month that much of the current economic paralysis in Haiti stems from past free-trade policies promoted by Washington, especially during his own administration (1993-2001).

At a March 10 appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Clinton conceded that the abolition of tariffs on imported rice—carried out by Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1994-1995 at the urging of the Clinton administration—had destroyed Haitian subsistence agriculture. “It is unrealistic to expect that a country can totally obliterate its capacity to feed itself and just skip a

stage of development,” he said. “I had to live every day with the consequences of the loss of capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people because of what I did; nobody else.” More importantly, the people of Haiti have to live with it.

According to government figures, 51 percent of all food consumed in Haiti is imported, including 80 percent of the rice. Haiti has become the fifth-largest export market for US-produced rice, and the leading company is Riceland Foods, based in Stuttgart, Arkansas, Clinton’s home state.

The donors’ conference in New York City, set for March 31, will set the stage for an effective takeover of Haiti by a consortium of foreign powers. The conference is supposed to approve an \$11.5 billion aid package for the country, whose distribution will be overseen by an Interim Haitian Recovery Commission that will give foreigners a formal, voting role on the use of aid money. Clinton is widely expected to be named co-chair, along with Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive.

The buy-in price is \$100 million: every aid donor that provides a pledge of that size or larger will have a voting seat on the commission’s board. Creditors who forgive Haitian debt of \$200 million or more will also have voting rights. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who announced last week the cancellation of Haiti’s \$200 million debt, will thus have the right to name a member of the committee. So will the Inter-American Development Bank, which announced March 22 it would forgive Haiti’s \$479 million in debt.



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