

Haitian president at White House: US military occupation to continue

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12 March 2010

Haitian President René Préval met Barack Obama at the White House Wednesday to discuss the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Haiti following the January 12 earthquake that killed up to a quarter of a million people. In a private meeting, Préval made an appeal for continued financial support for the relief efforts in his beleaguered country.

Préval and Obama held a joint press conference in the White House Rose Garden following the closed-door meeting. The remarks made by the two leaders revealed indifference to the suffering of the Haitian people and a deliberate distortion of the actual response by the US and Haitian governments to the crisis.

Obama told reporters, “The international community can pledge the resources that will be necessary for a coordinated and sustained effort, and, working together, we can ensure that assistance not simply delivers relief for the short term, but builds up Haiti’s capacity to deliver basic services and provide for the Haitian people over the long term.”

In reality, Obama has pledged to ask Congress to allocate a paltry \$1 billion in relief funds for Haiti, the equivalent of a few days’ spending on the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. The figure does not begin to address the immense social need overwhelming the devastated country. Preliminary reports have shown that it will likely cost as much as \$14 billion to rebuild the Haitian infrastructure, which was in wretched shape at time of the quake.

Of the Haitian government’s response to the tragedy, Obama told Préval in front of reporters, “Even as you and other Haitian leaders have endured your personal tragedies—losing your own homes, your loved ones—you have carried on with great courage and determination.” In fact, Préval was essentially invisible in the first

weeks following the earthquake. The president and his entire government proved useless and impotent in the face of disaster and the desperate needs of the Haitian population. Thousands have taken to the streets in protests against the regime’s inaction.

Echoing comments made by Préval when the latter told a crowd of thousands to “Wipe away your tears to rebuild Haiti,” the US president declared, “As you declared during last month’s national day of mourning, it is time to wipe away the tears. It is time for Haiti to rebuild.”

In the case of Obama, one can only ask, “What tears?” No objective observer of the response by the US government to the catastrophe could describe it as compassionate, and Obama, as is his wont, has appeared indifferent throughout.

In the days following the earthquake, the American military took control of Haiti’s only airport, blocking the entrance of vital relief supplies into the country, so that troops could be brought in to “secure” the population in the event the massive suffering erupted into violence against the government and the hated Haitian ruling elite.

Obama indicated during the press conference that the US military presence in Haiti would continue indefinitely, saying, “America’s commitment to Haiti’s recovery and reconstruction must endure and will endure.” While some US troops have been withdrawn from the country, 10,000 remain in or near Haiti, half of them on the mainland, the other half stationed offshore.

Two months after the earthquake, conditions in Haiti remain dire. A staggering 1.3 million Haitian citizens have been left homeless by the quake, more than 750,000 in the capital of Port-au-Prince alone. Hundreds of thousands have taken up makeshift

shelters in massive “tent cities,” in many cases with little more than a sheet propped up with sticks to provide protection from the elements.

The damage caused by the earthquake has only intensified what was already a social calamity. Prior to the disaster, only half of Haiti’s school-aged children attended school. Of the schools available, no more than 20 percent were public, with the rest too expensive for the majority of the population. UNICEF now reports that 3,000 school buildings were either destroyed or damaged during the earthquake, and the Caribbean nation does not have enough engineers in place to assess the safety of those buildings left standing. With no resources available to them, thousands of children simply linger in the camps with nothing to do.

April 15 marks the beginning of Haiti’s rainy season, which lasts through the summer. Because many of the encampments of homeless earthquake victims are located in low-lying areas, the risk of flooding becomes a major concern, as well as the spread of waterborne disease. The lack of any sanitation system and a major shortage of latrines available to the camps raise the risk of contamination to water supplies.

Underscoring the role of the American military in Haiti, whose first priority is to assert the interests of US imperialism and not to secure the needs of the suffering population, the US Navy’s hospital ship, “The Comfort,” the most sophisticated health care facility available to the Haitian people for the past two months, has been recalled and, as of Wednesday, was making its way home to Baltimore.

US Southern Command spokesman Jose Ruiz told the press that the hospital ship had had no patients in the last week and that “The situation on the ground in terms of the medical situation has improved.” He added, “Demand for medical care is not exceeding the capacity of facilities on the ground.” This is hardly credible.

As part of the Haitian government’s reconstruction plans, President Préval is campaigning for international support in the run-up to a March 31 donor’s conference at the United Nations during which, according to a US State Department press release, “Haiti will present its vision of Haiti’s future and how international support can assist.”

Reconstruction efforts will be subordinated entirely to the profit interests of US and European capitalism and

the interests of the Haitian ruling elite. It has been revealed that Patrick Delatour, Haiti’s minister of tourism and the leading official in reconstruction efforts, owns 5 percent of the GDG Concrete Construction company, Haiti’s sole supplier of ready-mix concrete. Delatour’s cousin is the majority owner of the company. The two men stand to make vast profits from international aid for reconstruction.

President Préval has also stressed the need for a program of “decentralization,” the rebuilding and relocation of facilities *and* citizens away from the capital, as an essential component in restoring the country. The program amounts to an effort to permanently remove Haiti’s poor, or substantial portions of them, from the capital of Port-au-Prince.

The role US imperialism intends to play in the country is clear. The crisis in Haiti will be exploited to reinforce and reassert American interests in the country. Washington intends to maintain a presence and “guiding hand” in the rebuilding of Haiti to lay the groundwork for the further exploitation of cheap labor.



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