

Washington asserts colonial-style control of Haiti at UN donors' conference

Barry Grey
2 April 2010

The international donors' conference for Haiti, held Wednesday at the United Nations in New York, was a forum for the United States, in the persons of Bill and Hillary Clinton, to assert American colonial-style control over the devastated island nation.

The event, co-sponsored by the US State Department and the UN, took pledges from some 100 countries, multilateral lending institutions and charities for \$5.3 billion in aid to Haiti over the next two years and an additional \$5 billion thereafter. This sum, already far from adequate to rebuild an impoverished country that lost between 250,000 and 300,000 people and suffered an estimated \$14 billion in damage in the January 12 earthquake, includes an unknown amount of previously pledged monies.

Going into the event, Haiti had received a mere \$23 million in cash of more than \$1.35 billion in previously committed humanitarian assistance.

On the dais for the event, UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon and Haitian President René Préval were flanked by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former President Bill Clinton, who is the UN special envoy to Haiti. Préval announced the formation of an Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission, co-chaired by Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive and Bill Clinton, which is to oversee the distribution of the reconstruction funds.

The board for the commission will have representatives from the US, Canada, Brazil, France, Venezuela and the European Union, along with the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank and the United Nations. This structure, to remain in place for at least 18 months, is transparently designed to place the fate of Haiti in the hands of the imperialist powers, with the US playing the uncontested dominant role.

Only the flimsiest pretense is being made that the Haitian government will exercise any sovereign control. As the *New York Times* noted in a March 31 article: "There has been a certain amount of grumbling around the United Nations about tight control by the State Department over the donor conference, with a senior European diplomat dubbing it 'The Bill and Hillary Show.'"

A *Washington Post* blog on Thursday noted: "Despite universal lip service about the necessity of Haitians taking ownership of their rebuilding, no one was really fooled. Hillary Clinton, as US secretary of state, was co-chair of the conference... Bill Clinton—the "United Nations special envoy for Haiti"—will be calling the shots in the near term in conjunction with Haiti's prime minister as to the strategy, coordination and direction of that international aid. Can you say, 'Mr. Viceroy?'"

Of the \$5.3 billion in short-term aid pledged at the conference, the US accounted for only \$1.15 billion, less than the \$1.7 billion pledged by the European Union and even less than Venezuela's pledge of \$1.3 billion. The US pledge to help a country whose devastation is largely the result of over a century of American imperialist domination, including repeated military occupations, is a tiny fraction of the amount allocated to bail out Wall Street.

The Obama administration responded to the January 12 earthquake by dispatching coast guard cutters and naval ships to patrol the waters around Haiti and prevent refugees from the disaster finding shelter in the US. This was followed by a massive military occupation, involving over 12,000 soldiers and Marines.

The US seized control of the Port-au-Prince airport and for days blocked desperately needed food, water, medical supplies and medical personnel from getting

into the city, which had been leveled by the 7.0 magnitude quake, so that it could deploy its military forces. Washington's overriding aim was to suppress any popular unrest arising from the disaster and utilize the tragedy to tighten its grip on the country.

As a result, thousands died needlessly, either buried in the rubble or dying from wounds not treated in time. More than two months later, while the dignitaries gathered in New York and discussed their plans to "rebuild" Haiti, more than a million Haitians who lost their homes were struggling to survive in makeshift tents set up in squalid camps without proper sanitation or other elementary services.

The US military continues to control the airport and a large contingent of troops remains in the country.

As the *New York Times* reported March 27, much of the aid money that has gone to Haiti has ended up further enriching the country's tiny ruling elite, which basks in luxury while 80 percent of the people survive on less than \$2 a day. The *Times* quoted one resident of a tent city set up in the exclusive Pétionville district of Port-au-Prince, who said, "The rich people sometimes need to step over us to get inside" their chic restaurants.

The article continued: "Often, just a gate and a private guard armed with a 12-gauge shotgun separate the newly homeless from establishments like Les Galeries Rivoli, a boutique where wealthy Haitians and foreigners shop for Raymond Weil watches and Izod shirts."

The danger of a social eruption by the oppressed Haitian masses was undoubtedly what Hillary Clinton had in mind when she told the donors' conference, "The challenges that have plagued Haiti could erupt with global consequences."

Bill Clinton continued, as he had prior to the earthquake, to insist that Haiti's salvation lay in attracting private capital, primarily American, by promoting the profit potential of exploiting Haiti's vast pool of super-cheap labor. He said he would push to remove trade barriers to the US import of Haitian garments, produced by workers earning less than \$3 a day.

Referring in his remarks to the conference to a social and human tragedy with few parallels in modern history—to which he greatly contributed during his two terms as president—Clinton spoke as if he were discussing a corporate merger or the setting up of a new

hedge fund. "My job in the next 18 months," he said, "is going to be to try to connect the inside and outside forces in a way that maximizes the input and the impact of all the players, and minimizes the frictions and transaction costs."

Aside from setting up more garment sweatshops, the main component of the "reconstruction" plan submitted by Haitian President Préval with the blessing of Washington appears to center on relocating impoverished workers from Port-au-Prince to more rural areas. This would serve the two-fold function of permitting a gentrification of the capital, making it more attractive to foreign investors, and disaggregating the working class in the hope of dissipating its potential social and political power.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact