

American imperialism and the Haitian catastrophe

Patrick Martin
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The six-month anniversary of the earthquake that destroyed much of Haiti was observed Monday, with media coverage admitting there has been virtually no progress in rebuilding the devastated country or rehousing the 1.5 million made homeless by the worst natural disaster of the new century.

The US government gave only the most perfunctory notice to the anniversary. Obama mentioned Haiti in passing in the course of a brief press appearance with the visiting president of the Dominican Republic, the country that shares the island of Hispaniola.

Obama has not visited Haiti since the earthquake, a decision that underscores his indifference to the staggering death toll and the continuing human suffering. The country can be reached in a brief plane flight on Air Force One, and is closer to Washington than any number of fundraising dinners addressed by the Democratic president.

The Obama administration mobilized some 12,000 soldiers and sailors to seize control of key points in the capital city, Port-au-Prince, in the immediate aftermath of the quake. This military incursion, which had the effect of disrupting rather than facilitating relief efforts, was brought to an end once Washington was confident there would be no popular uprising against its stooge president, René Préval, and the tiny elite of Haitian multimillionaires.

It is more than a symbolic coincidence that the last major US combat force withdrew from Haiti June 1, the date that marks the official beginning of the Atlantic hurricane season. The people of Haiti, both the 1.5 million still living in tents and millions more in rickety slum dwellings just as unlikely to survive a hurricane, are being left to fend for themselves.

One veteran aid worker noted the contrast between the vast pile of smashed concrete that is Port-au-Prince

and the heavy equipment brought into the country by the US military and then withdrawn, without ever being used except to clear the port and airport, the key access points for military supply operations. Meanwhile, hand removal of rubble by wheelbarrows and bucket brigades is the principal employment of those left homeless and jobless by the disaster.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, what has happened to Haiti is a social as well as a natural disaster. Well before the earthquake struck, the country was the poorest in the Western hemisphere, with the lowest per capita GDP, the lowest life expectancy, the lowest level of literacy, and the worst prospects for the future of its children. That poverty was not the product of “nature,” but of Haiti’s long history of colonial and semi-colonial exploitation.

Haiti is endowed by nature with a tropical climate and fertile soil. It was as prosperous, per capita, as the United States when the slave population revolted and drove out the French slave-owners in the great revolution that culminated in independence in 1803. But for two centuries the Haitian population has been afflicted by foreign economic domination and the misrule of a rapacious and brutal elite, closely tied economically and politically to Washington, particularly in the last century.

In the course of the past 100 years, the United States has intervened militarily in Haiti five times, occupying the country directly for a combined total of nearly 25 years: 1914, 1915-1934, 1994-95, 2004 and 2010. The protracted occupation of 1915-34 left power in the hands of a US-trained military force that turned its guns against the Haitian people and became the main prop of the Duvalier family dictatorship that ruled barbarically for 30 years.

The 23 years since the collapse of the Duvalier

regime have seen repeated US interventions to change governments and dictate economic policies that have served US corporate interests, while devastating the agricultural and manufacturing base of the country. With the possible exceptions of Iraq and Afghanistan, no country in the world has been so despoiled by Washington's aggression, subversion and economic domination as Haiti.

This relationship continues in the so-called rebuilding effort sponsored by the United Nations. The commission established in March to oversee use of the \$5.3 billion pledged to Haitian reconstruction is co-chaired by Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive, but real power lies in the hands of the American co-chair, former president Bill Clinton, and the Obama administration.

It is Washington that calls the shots on the use of the aid money, despite the fig leaf of Haitian participation. The commission did not even meet officially until June 17, more than five months after the earthquake, and then only because the onset of hurricane season made it necessary to approve a mere \$31 million in projects to build hurricane shelters for a small fraction of the population.

Former president Clinton has repeatedly declared that his main goal is to encourage private investment in Haiti, and toward that end he has systematically promoted policies to ensure the profits of the banks and corporations of the United States and other imperialist powers.

In an op-ed column in the *New York Times* this weekend, co-authored with Prime Minister Bellerive, Clinton declares, "[T]here are ample opportunities for investments with longer-term dividends—in agriculture, construction, tourism, manufacturing, service industries and clean energy, especially solar."

The reconstruction of this oppressed and suffering country is an urgent humanitarian task, but American imperialism has absolutely nothing to offer the people of Haiti. It is the American and international working class—including the Haitian working class, both on the island and in the diaspora—that must take the lead in this struggle.

The international working class must demand immediate and massive assistance to the people of Haiti, including the deployment of construction equipment and skilled construction workers, and

emergency medical and other technical assistance. These resources will not be provided by the imperialist powers and could not be put to use by the semi-criminal Haitian ruling elite.

The reconstruction of Haiti requires the mobilization of the working class internationally on the basis of socialist policies, uniting Haitian workers with their class brothers and sisters throughout the Caribbean and the entire hemisphere, including, above all, the United States.

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