

Thousands feared dead as devastating earthquake hits Haiti

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Haiti was hit Saturday morning by an earthquake measuring 7.2 on the Richter scale. Official reports currently place the number of fatalities at more than 700, but thousands remain unaccounted for, meaning the death toll will in all likelihood rise dramatically in coming days.

The long tremor was felt throughout the country, with its epicenter located near the city of Saint-Louis-du-Sud, 100 miles southwest of the capital, Port-au-Prince.

In 2010, Port-au-Prince was devastated by a magnitude 7.0 earthquake that killed more than 300,000 people, injured even more, and displaced 1.5 million. The poorest country in the western hemisphere, Haiti has yet to recover from that disaster.

Even though the densely populated capital was spared this time, the toll from the latest earthquake in terms of deaths, injuries and material damage will nonetheless be high. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) issued a “red alert” for the disaster and estimated that fatalities could reach into the thousands. “High casualties and extensive damage are probable and the disaster is likely widespread,” the USGS said.

In the southwestern peninsula, the hardest hit region of the country, the earthquake damaged or flattened many buildings, including churches and hotels, trapped people under debris and caused flooding after underground pipes ruptured. The largest city in the region, Les Cayes, with a population of 150,000, saw the collapse of several buildings, including the largest supermarket, jeopardizing the supply of food and other necessities to residents.

Complicating search and rescue efforts, a mountain road connecting Les Cayes to the peninsula’s second-largest city, Jeremie, has been cut off by boulders after major landslides and rockfalls that were triggered by the earthquake. The main public hospital in Jeremie, with a population of 130,000, rapidly filled to capacity with people with broken limbs, said Ricardo Chery, a local journalist. “The roof of the cathedral fell down,” said Job Joseph, a resident.

The official provisional death toll is already severe. According to a communiqué issued by the Haitian Civil

Protection agency, 724 people are confirmed dead and more than 2,800 are injured. Its director, Jerry Chandler, said that the few existing hospitals in the region are struggling to provide emergency care. At least three hospitals, in the communes of Pestel, Corailles and Roseaux, are completely saturated with victims.

The communiqué reports that at least 949 houses, seven churches, two hotels and three schools were destroyed, while 723 houses, a prison, three medical centers and seven schools were damaged. Port, airport and telecommunications infrastructure, however, are said to have not been badly damaged.

Prime Minister Ariel Henry, who was appointed after last month’s murder of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, has declared a month-long state of emergency. But there has been little government help on the ground.

Rescue operations, carried out by the local population with their bare hands or with makeshift means, could be complicated by tropical storm Grace, which is expected to hit the country Monday evening. Significant rainfall could create mudslides and further destabilize buildings.

While Haiti has been repeatedly hit by disasters of a natural origin, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, their catastrophic impact is bound up with the conditions of abject poverty, endemic corruption, unending political instability and profound socio-economic crisis that are the legacy of decades of imperialist oppression, above all at the hands of US imperialism.

Swaths of the Haitian population face grinding poverty and hunger, and the country’s meager health care services are overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Caribbean nation of 11 million has been in the throes of a political crisis since Moïse was assassinated on July 7 in what appears to have been an operation ordered by a rival faction of Haiti’s corrupt, pro-imperialist ruling elite. Citing concerns for his safety and a lack of security, the judge placed in charge of further investigating the assassination plot and bringing charges against those arrested withdrew on Friday.

The emergency response to the earthquake has been made even more complicated because road access to the peninsula region struck by the quake has been cut off by violent armed gang warfare at the southern entrance to Haiti's capital. With the support of competing sections of the Haitian elite vying for power, criminal gangs have proliferated as instruments for the violent suppression of the Haitian working class and oppressed masses.

In a thoroughly cynical statement issued Saturday, US President Joe Biden claimed that "The United States remains a close and enduring friend to the people of Haiti" and "will be there in the aftermath of this tragedy."

What hypocrisy! Since its first invasion of Haiti in 1915, US imperialism has a record of ruthlessly suppressing popular opposition to the imperialist dominance of the island nation. For three decades during the 20th century, Washington backed the brutal Duvalier dictatorship. In 2004, American troops intervened at the head of an international military invasion to oust the elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and initiate more than a decade of neocolonial-style occupation by forces organized under the auspices of the United Nations.

The point-person who Biden has named to supervise the latest US "support" effort, USAID Administrator Samantha Power, is one of the leading political-ideological proponents of "human rights" imperialism. She played a major role within the Obama administration in pressing for the US regime-change war in Libya, a brutal air war that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people and plunged the North African country into a bloody civil war that continues to rage a decade later.

The type of "support" the Haitian people can expect from the Washington is exemplified by its response to the last major earthquake in 2010.

Under conditions of a popular groundswell of international sympathy and support for the Haitian people, Washington and its allies made a show of providing assistance to Haiti. International donors pledged \$10.4 billion for Haiti, including \$3.9 billion from the US. But while feigning humanitarian concerns, the western powers, led by the US, Canada, and France, pursued entirely predatory objectives. These included: propping up a puppet regime capable of maintaining political "stability," that is subjugating Haiti's impoverished masses; providing political cover for the brutal treatment and expulsion of Haitian refugees; and promoting Haiti as a cheap labor producer for the international garment and other industries (the Caracol project).

The chief figure overseeing this relief effort was former US President Bill Clinton.

In the ensuing decade, the Haitian masses saw very little of this money. The lion's share of it was sucked up by the

major transnational corporations in charge of "reconstruction" projects and by the handsomely-paid bureaucracy of various international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). What little found its way into the country itself was gobbled up by various sections of the venal Haitian ruling class.

A high point in these sordid relations was the 2010-2011 presidential elections, which saw Hillary Clinton's State Department intervene to install Michel Martelly as Haiti's next president, a right-wing musician with close ties to the former Duvalier dictatorship. Before Clinton's intervention, Martelly had placed third in the first round of the elections and would have been excluded from the second round, which was limited to the top two vote winners.

Martelly's chosen successor was a little-known businessman, Jovenel Moïse, who came to power in rigged elections, again with US support. Moïse went on to head a corrupt, right-wing government that depended on political support from Washington and on armed criminal gangs at home to bloodily suppress growing popular opposition to its IMF-dictated austerity policies. This earned him the hatred of the population. Following Moïse's assassination last July, and amid a bitter power conflict within Haiti's political elite, Henry was hand-picked by the United States, France, Canada, and the other members of the so-called "Core Group" of nations to take over.

Today, just as in 2010, Haiti remains the poorest and most socially unequal country in the Western Hemisphere. While the masses of Haiti remain mired in poverty, the former US president and his wife Hillary Clinton, the 2016 Democratic presidential candidate, have seen their own wealth soar, raking in an estimated \$230 million in income since Bill Clinton left the White House.

After Saturday's latest devastating earthquake, aiding the people of Haiti and rebuilding the country on the basis of human needs rather than the interests of the native elite and the foreign banks and corporations can be achieved only through a struggle to overcome the bitter legacy of decades of imperialist oppression. This requires uniting the working class in Haiti, the US and throughout the hemisphere in a common fight for the socialist transformation of society.



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