

Death toll in Haiti skyrockets following devastating earthquake

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17 August 2021

The death toll following the 7.2-magnitude earthquake that struck southern Haiti Saturday is rising rapidly into the thousands, with government officials reporting yesterday that 1,900 people have been confirmed dead. Thousands more who were injured face the threat of disease, hunger and death in the days and weeks ahead as the health care system in the affected regions collapses and the disaster zone threatens to become a hotbed for COVID-19.

Official figures show that over 9,000 people were injured in the quake, whose epicenter was 12 miles northeast of the town of Saint-Louis-du-Sud. More than 37,300 homes were completely destroyed and a further 46,000 were damaged. Fully 30,000 people were made homeless overnight. According to *Le Nouvelliste*, Haiti's main newspaper, hospitals, schools, office buildings and churches were also demolished or damaged. The roads between Le Cayes and Jeremie, two badly affected towns, have been blocked by mudslides and aftershocks. Some communities near the epicenter of the quake have yet to be reached.

The unfolding catastrophe was compounded Monday by the arrival of tropical storm Grace, which battered homeless residents in makeshift shelters with heavy rain and winds of over 40 miles per hour. Fully 75,000 families across three districts have suffered flooding in the wake of the earthquake.

While the earthquake was a natural disaster, the horrendous social conditions that have pushed the death toll into the thousands are the product of decades of US imperialist meddling in the western hemisphere's poorest country. Haiti, which has suffered over a century of disastrous military interventions and occupations by Washington, lacks even the most basic resources to tend to the sick and injured. At the general hospital in the badly damaged city of Le Cayes, Dr. Paurus Michelete, who has treated over 250 patients, told the newspaper that

painkillers, analgesics and steel pins to treat fractures are running out.

At the hospital, patients have been housed on verandahs, patios, and in hallways. Others were forced to wait outdoors as the storm approached. "After two days, they are almost always generally infected," Michelete said of the patients' wounds.

Reports from Le Cayes say desperate residents are rummaging through flattened buildings for scrap metal to sell in order to obtain food. A representative from a US-based urban rescue firm involved in search and rescue efforts told *USA Today* that food, drinking water, health care, shelter and sanitary products are all in high demand.

"I saw strong winds and heavy rainfall strike the same areas already affected by the earthquake," added Bruno Maes, UNICEF's representative in Haiti. "Countless Haitian families who have lost everything due to the earthquake are now living literally with their feet in the water due to the flooding." UNICEF estimates that 1.2 million people, including 540,000 children, have been impacted by the earthquake.

These chaotic scenes are creating ideal conditions for COVID-19 to run rampant. The first vaccinations only arrived in the country a month ago. Testing is almost non-existent, making it impossible to tell how widespread the virus is. According to Reuters, the death rate among the 800 patients treated at one hospital on the outskirts of the capital, Port-au-Prince, has been 10 percent.

The absence of any government support for the devastated region is already provoking social tensions. A crowd of angry residents gathered in front of a collapsed building amid shouts of frustration. Jerry Chandler, head of Haiti's Office for Civil Protection, remarked that "people are getting aggressive."

Haiti's corrupt and venal ruling elite is utterly incapable of providing the urgently required health care, social and economic resources to the tens of thousands of families

devastated by the earthquake. Prime Minister Ariel Henry, the hand-picked choice of Washington, who was installed following last month's assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, claimed Monday that his government would intensify its rescue efforts. He tweeted that the authorities would step up their efforts "ten-fold."

In reality, the social and economic disaster over which successive governments have presided since Haiti's last catastrophic earthquake in 2010 is complicating support and rescue efforts at every turn. That quake, which struck near Port-au-Prince, killed upwards of 300,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands more.

Even transporting medical and food supplies from Port-au-Prince to the southwestern region is a logistical nightmare due to the fact that armed gangs control the connecting road and adjacent areas. These gangs were systematically built up by factions of the Haitian ruling elite to suppress popular opposition following the eruption of mass protests and strikes in 2018 in response to Moïse's enforcement of gas price hikes and other IMF-dictated austerity measures.

Moïse was the chosen successor of Michel Martelly, a former singer with ties to the Duvalier dictatorship who was installed as Haiti's president in 2011. This was on the initiative of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her husband and former US President Bill Clinton, who was serving as the United Nations envoy to Haiti at the time.

The Clintons' intervention in support of Martelly came after he finished a distant third in the presidential election and was facing elimination. He was chosen by Washington because he was seen as a safe pair of hands to protect the interests of the international investors in Haiti's poverty-wage garment sector and other industries, and oversee the "recovery" from the 2010 earthquake. In addition to protecting the profits of the corporations, Martelly's term was characterized by rampant corruption as the millions in aid money funneled into Haiti following the earthquake flowed into the pockets of well-connected businessmen and political figures.

Moïse, who also received Washington's blessing, continued the legacy of his mentor, and took steps to sideline political opponents and establish a more explicitly authoritarian regime, which was seen as necessary to suppress popular opposition while continuing with the extraction of profits from Haiti's sweatshops, agribusiness and mining sectors. Prior to his assassination, he fired dozens of mayors who were critical of his government and pushed for a constitutional change to allow him to serve two successive presidential terms.

Protests flared up again in February after Moïse refused to step down from the presidency when his first term expired.

Although the official narrative of Moïse's assassination is that it was carried out by Colombian mercenaries, strong evidence suggests that it was perpetrated by a rival faction of the ruling elite that felt threatened by his ever more overt grab for dictatorial powers, particularly his threat to break their monopoly in various economic sectors. Not a single one of the presidential guards was injured during the supposed assault on the presidential palace, which is only accessible by a single road out of Port-au-Prince.

Now, with Washington backing a cover-up of the assassination in hopes of cobbling together a new pro-imperialist regime capable of enforcing the interests of big capital and the super-rich, the earthquake has plunged the country's long-suffering masses even further into a health care catastrophe and social and economic distress. Aid efforts overseen by the imperialist powers will prove to be no more successful than they were in 2010 and will only serve to tighten imperialism's grip over the devastated country.

The Pentagon has already announced the creation of a military-style task force to oversee American involvement through USAID, an organization notorious for ruthlessly pursuing American imperialist interests around the world. The individual overseeing USAID's involvement in Haiti is none other than Samantha Power, a leading advocate of "human rights" imperialism who cut her teeth in the brutal air bombardment of Libya in 2011.

The only viable response to the calamitous conditions in Haiti is the waging of a political struggle by the Haitian masses as part of a mass mobilization throughout the Caribbean and entire region on the basis of a socialist program to put an end to the imperialist domination of Haiti once and for all.



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