

Haiti's cholera toll: An indictment of Imperialism

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Like the massive death toll inflicted by the earthquake last January, the cholera outbreak in Haiti is not some natural disaster, but rather the product of desperate poverty created by centuries of imperialist oppression.

Haitian and international officials reported Sunday that the death toll from the outbreak of cholera had reached 337, with over 4,000 confirmed cases of the disease, mostly in the central and northern part of the Caribbean nation.

The water-borne intestinal disease causes uncontrollable diarrhea and vomiting which can claim its victims in hours from dehydration if untreated. As 75 percent of those who contract cholera exhibit no symptoms, the real number of those infected is thought to be some 15,000.

Haitian health ministry and United Nations officials are warning that the epidemic is likely to get worse before it can get better and could end up claiming “tens of thousands” of victims. The cholera outbreak could prove virtually uncontrollable if it spreads into the slums of the capital of Port-au-Prince. Particularly vulnerable are the more than 1,300 squalid tent cities which, 10 months after the country's devastating earthquake killed approximately a quarter of a million people, are still home to some 1.3 million internally displaced persons.

At least six cases of cholera have already been reported in Port-au-Prince, though there is widespread suspicion that Haitian authorities are reluctant to confirm an outbreak in the capital. While health officials have claimed that these cases have involved people who contracted the disease in the rural Artibonite region in center of the country, doctors at one clinic have reported treating a girl from the sprawling Cite Soleil slum who had not been out of the city.

Neither Haiti nor anywhere else in the Western hemisphere has seen such an epidemic of cholera in the last century.

The disease is easily preventable and easily treatable—given minimal conditions of sanitation and the availability of clean water. Such conditions, however, are beyond the reach of the great majority of Haiti's population, more than half of which lives in abject poverty. In rural areas, where most Haitians live, less than 8 percent of the population has access to secure drinking water, according to a report by the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

As for the Port-au-Prince camps in which over one million people are languishing under makeshift tents, virtually none have running water.

The cholera epidemic is not an after-effect of the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti last January. The abysmal social conditions that facilitate such an outbreak of the disease were present well before then. They are the same conditions that left the Haitian people so vulnerable to the quake, resulting in the appalling death toll.

Underlying these conditions are economic and political relations forged through a century of exploitation and oppression of the Caribbean nation at the hands of US-based banks and corporations. Their domination has been enforced through the brutal repression of the population conducted by US military occupations and a succession of US-backed dictatorships, most infamously that of the Duvalier dynasty, which ruled the country through the death squad terror of the Tontons Macoutes for nearly 30 years.

The reaction of the Obama administration to Haiti's plight in the wake of last January's earthquake has been entirely in line with this shameful legacy. Its immediate response was to dispatch an armed US military force of 12,000 to seize control of strategic areas of the capital and ensure that no popular uprising challenged US domination and the rule of Haiti's wealthy oligarchy. Once it became clear that security could be maintained, this force was withdrawn, leaving Haiti in a shambles.

Nothing has been done to replace Haiti's shattered infrastructure, which was already in a calamitous state before the quake. Barely 2 percent of the rubble has been removed from Port-au-Prince, the precondition for any rebuilding.

And, while millions of ordinary people in the US and internationally responded powerfully to the appeal for aid to Haiti, virtually none of that aid has gotten to the Haitian people.

Less than 2 percent of the \$5.3 billion in aid pledged by world governments for 2010-2011 has been delivered. Washington has set the example by delivering not one penny of the \$1.15 billion that it promised. The criminal failure to make good on these promises has left the Haitian population largely defenceless in the face of the cholera epidemic.

Some of the aid that has been forthcoming from the US has only deepened Haiti's crisis. Washington has subsidized the export of cheap rice to the country, undercutting local farmers and threatening to bankrupt Haiti's agricultural sector, upon which 66 percent of the population depends for its survival.

This is part of a longstanding policy in which "aid" is employed by Washington as a means of deepening Haiti's subordination to US capitalism and furthering US strategic interests in the region.

These methods have played a very direct role in the current outbreak of cholera. In an attempt to undermine the government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—who was overthrown in a US-backed coup in 2004—Washington blocked loans from the Inter-American Development Bank that were earmarked for the development of Haiti's water infrastructure, including the provision of a safe water supply to the Artibonite region, the epicenter of the current outbreak.

The plight of the Haitian people is not unique. Billions of human beings across the planet confront similar conditions of abject poverty and are prey to ancient diseases that modern technology make entirely preventable.

The United Nations reported last week that 1,500 people in Nigeria have lost their lives to

cholera, while three other African nations are confronting the spread of the disease. Pakistan and Nepal have also reported outbreaks. The World Health Organization estimates that there are 3 to 5 million cholera cases every year, with between 100,000 and 120,000 dying from the disease annually. The toll is rising, according to the WHO, a manifestation of the increasingly desperate conditions created by capitalism in crisis.

The figures for waterborne diseases as a whole are even more staggering. According to the WHO, they will claim the lives of 1.4 million children this year, 90 percent of them under the age of five. That is approximately 4,000 children dying every single day for the want of rudimentary sanitation and access to clean water.

These conditions, in Haiti and internationally, are an inescapable indictment of the profit system, which subordinates all human endeavor to the enrichment of a narrow financial elite and condemns millions to die as part of the bargain.

Without a fundamental transformation of the existing social order, these millions will continue to lose their lives to preventable and survivable diseases. The eradication of poverty is impossible within the framework of the profit system.

The struggle posed in Haiti and in every country is that of putting an end to the capitalist system and reorganizing global economic life by freeing it from subordination to profit and dedicating it to meeting the needs of all the world's people.

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