

No 'Hope for Haiti' Without Justice

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In-depth Report: [HAITI](#)

Global Research, January 21, 2010

[Al Jazeera](#) 19 January 2010

On Friday, the US' leading entertainers will once again organise a star-studded telethon in order to raise money for victims of an almost incomprehensible tragedy - the third time they have done so in less than a decade.

The first, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, understandably avoided any sort of critical political imagery or discourse in favour of uniting the country in support of the victims.

The 2005 telethon in response to the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina occurred at a tenuous political moment, as violence was flaring in Iraq and Americans were beginning to question President Bush's true motives for invading the country.

The massive incompetence surrounding the government relief effort was already apparent, but apart from rapper Kanye West declaring - to much criticism - that "President Bush doesn't care about black people," none of the artists who performed or spoke addressed the glaring structural problems that allowed the hurricane to produce such unprecedented damage.

Four-and-a-half years later, the endemic problems that exacerbated the hurricane's damage remain largely unaddressed.

But they are far from public view (aside from the poor and working class public of New Orleans, that is) and outside the cheery narrative of rebuilding and recovery symbolised by the success of the New Orleans' football team, The Saints, who will host the city's first Conference Championship game in the refurbished Superdome, which during the height of the Katrina disaster housed thousands of flood refugees.

As the carnage of the largest earthquake to hit Haiti in 200 years comes into full view, the biggest stars of Hollywood and the music industry are coming together for a "Hope for Haiti" telethon.

But there can be no hope for Haiti without justice, and no justice without an honest appraisal of the centuries-long history that set the country up for such a devastating political and social collapse in the wake of the earthquake.

A history largely ignored

The roots of this collapse are as deep as they are unknown - or unappreciated - by the majority of Americans - although it is widely discussed across the globe.

Haiti, then Saint Dominigue, was among the first islands "discovered" by Columbus, and

became France's – and likely Europe's – most profitable colony. Its more than 800,000 slaves produced upwards of half the sugar and coffee consumed in Europe.

The discourse of freedom and equality underlying the American and French revolutions had a profound impact on the island's African slave population, who led the first successful slave revolution in the Western hemisphere, creating the first free black republic in the wake of their successful independence struggle against Napoleon's army.

Far from embracing the new republic – the second independent country in the Americas – the administration of President Thomas Jefferson, under pressure from southern slave-holding politicians, refused to recognise Haiti.

Just as Communist Cuba was deemed to constitute a grave threat to capitalist America a century and a half later, a revolutionary republic of free Africans set a very bad precedent for its huge neighbour to the Northeast, where slavery was still a major component of the economy.

Rather than finding an ally in the still young US, Haiti was shackled with a crushing debt by France as the price of independence.

From democracy to dictatorship

After a century of alternating democratic and dictatorial rule, Haiti was invaded and occupied by US marines from 1915 to 1934, during which time the US overturned laws that restricted foreign ownership, allowing American corporations to gain a permanent foothold in the country's agriculturally dominated economy.

The first two decades of post-occupation politics saw as many coups, until stability of a sort was attained with the election of Francois Duvalier, known as "Papa Doc", in 1957.

But his rule quickly deteriorated into a brutal dictatorship, equalled in its corruption and violence only by that of his son, Jean-Claude ("Baby Doc"), who ruled from 1971 until 1986.

Despite the intense brutality and corruption of the regime, the US supported Duvalier as a counterweight to neighbouring communist Cuba and because of his friendliness to US corporate interests.

After widespread protests forced Duvalier from power, a series of military caretaker government reforms eventually led to the election of the former priest, Jean-Bertrande Aristide, in 1990 on a platform that included land reform and reforestation as well as aid to poor farmers and increased wages and rights for the increasing number of sweatshop workers.

However, Aristide's radical economic reforms alienated the country's elite, who supported his overthrow and exile the next year, likely with US backing or at least acquiescence.

Aristide returned to power under a US-backed UN mandate in 1994, and turned over power to a democratically elected successor, Rene Preval, in 1996.

Aristide once again became president in 2000 under a cloud of political infighting and election irregularities.

His new term was marred by violence and opposition accusations of violence and corruption, and he was ousted again in 2004 with the support of the administration of George Bush, who provided a military and diplomatic “escort” for his departure from Haiti, from which he still remains in exile in South Africa.

Price of economic liberalisation

As with most parts of the developing world, the present-day concentration of urban poverty in Haiti, which led to millions of people living in the ramshackle slums that literally disintegrated during the earthquake, owe their origins to policies of economic liberalisation and privatisation begun in the mid-1980s.

Their goal was to open Haiti even further to foreign economic penetration and control in the age of globalisation (Jamaica underwent a similar process, as did other Caribbean countries, with almost as bad results).

Repeating a process as old as industrial capitalism itself, the degradation of Haitian food production and the increased foreign control of land through peasant indebtedness led to the creation of a huge surplus labour pool that would become the engine of a low-cost labour-led export oriented economy controlled by the country’s elite and their US and European allies (particularly USAID) by the 2000s.

Privatisation programmes imposed by the IMF, World Bank and other international lenders led to even greater control of the country’s agricultural sector land by US and other multinational corporations.

This process was epitomised by the shift in agriculture from local production to export oriented crops and to the break-down of Haiti’s rural economy with the import of heavily subsidised American products – exemplified by “faux-cheap” American rice with which the locally produced rice could not compete.

Even aid programmes intended to help desperately poor Haitian women provided credit to buy cheap foreign products, further undermining the fragile agricultural economy in the name of progress.

One of the most fertile lands in the Western hemisphere suddenly became a net importer of many basic foodstuffs, leading to even more widespread poverty, malnutrition and an exodus of increasingly landless farmers to the cities in search of any kind of work. The growing unrest produced by this process was one of the factors that forced Baby Doc from power in this period.

The first Aristide government tried to change this situation by coordinating rice production, providing seed and fertiliser to poor farmers, and managing imports so as to mitigate the impact of cheaper US-grown rice on the local market, but these policies were heavily opposed by American corporations operating in Haiti, backed by the US government and lenders such as the IMF.

Together, they oversaw a regime in which Haitian peasants grew ever more indebted and, after Aristide was ousted, were according to analysts, “driven into the ground” as what little state support there was ended.

This dynamic continued after his return, part of the price of which was clearly his markedly toning down his reform agenda and acquiescing to US-backed reforms that many Haitians deride as the “plan of death”.

With his reform agenda crippled, his government became marred by charges of violence and toleration of drug-running and other criminal activities.

A disappearing state

Once of the most striking things about the aftermath of last week’s earthquake is the almost total absence of the Haitian state, which seemed to collapse with the parliament and presidential palace.

But the absence of any kind of effective state response is not surprising; indeed, it is the result of deliberate policies set in place during the last three decades under the neoliberal structural reforms supervised by the US and international lenders.

As one local agronomist put it 15 years ago: “In the neoliberal system they say the state should ‘be efficient,’ but that is not what they really want. They want the state to disappear.”

Disappearing states is one of the hallmarks of the structural adjustment programmes pushed by the “Washington Consensus” model of liberalisation of economies across the developing world precisely because a robust state beholden to its people would never tolerate such policies.

In Haiti this process has led to increased poverty, degradation of land (foreign corporations have much less interest in preserving the integrity and sustainability of the land and surrounding ecosystems than local farmers) and inequality almost everywhere it has been practiced.

As in the “banana republics” of Central America in the first half of the 20th century, the overwhelming power of the “big brother” to the north – the US government and corporations tied to it – has made creating a healthy, balanced and self-sufficient economy impossible to imagine.

And so, despite the fact that for centuries Haiti’s land has been among the richest and most fertile in the world, it remains “the poorest country in the Western hemisphere,” as foreign media routinely describe even in the best of times.

Aristide’s US-backed removal in 2004 came on the heels of a US-imposed trade embargo after he began to balk at continuing to implement the demanded reforms which drove peasants and workers alike into even deeper poverty.

The governments installed by the US – and, disgracefully, backed by the United Nations and an increasingly corporatised international NGO system that is largely unaccountable to ordinary Haitians – have proved even more corrupt than those of the pre-Aristide era.

New vision, same old vision

This dynamic is crucial, for when former US President Bill Clinton and other officials involved in Haiti’s perpetual “development process” speak of how the country was “turning a corner”

or “on the verge” of renewed growth and stability, what they mean is that internal opposition to the disastrous neoliberal programmes supported by Presidents Bush, Clinton, Bush and now Obama, has been tamped down to the point where they can be implemented without too much resistance – in part by a UN ‘stabilisation mission’ that has been marred by violence against Haitians and the support of the country’s elite.

Indeed, the Clinton-Obama vision for Haiti’s future, already in play before the earthquake, is to transform Haiti into another Caribbean US-satellite country, with a largely privatised and deregulated economy based on low-wage, ecologically dubious tourism and sweatshop industries and where, like its neighbour Jamaica, increasing poverty and inequality are largely hidden from view.

Rather than invest in capital and local infrastructure to help build a self-sufficient economy, Clinton and other foreign policy-makers want to create “more jobs by lowering the cost of doing business,” which inevitably includes lower wages and relaxed labour and environmental laws.

The last coup union organisers and other activists are routinely and often violently attacked by the government, while Aristide’s Lavalas party, the most popular in the country, remains barred.

Ultimately, the policies of the last four US administrations have been successful in crushing most opposition to the reforms that laid the foundation for the disastrous consequences of the earthquake.

In the wake of this unprecedented destruction what best-selling Shock Doctrine author Naomi Klein has described as “disaster capitalists” are already hovering like vultures over the human, ecological and economic wreckage, waiting to come in and complete the transformation of Haiti into another Caribbean theme park-slash-sweatshop, with an unprecedentedly desperate population unable to offer even the modicum of resistance offered during the last decade.

Whitewashing history

Haiti’s complex and, from an American point of view, largely unpleasant and unedifying history must be acknowledged if there is to be any hope that the country’s internationally financed reconstruction will not merely lay the groundwork for more poverty and disasters.

Sadly, Obama, who famously admitted in his 2009 Cairo speech that the US had in fact overthrown the elected government in Iran, has so far said nothing about the even more extensive US history of meddling in Haiti.

Instead, writing in Newsweek, the president declared that “at long last, after decades of conflict and instability, Haiti was showing hopeful signs of political and economic progress”.

Needless to say, if there was any substantive progress, the state would not have utterly disappeared in the rubble of the temblor.

Seemingly oblivious to the role of the US and UN in producing Haiti’s current woes, Obama declared that: “The United States will be there with the Haitian government and the United Nations every step of the way.”

If the past is any guide, this does not augur well for the country's future.

Indeed, Gerald Zarr, the former USAID Haiti director, was more honest in explaining that "Haiti's going to have to change" - which is code for being even more acquiescent to the kinds of reforms that helped produce the disastrous consequences of the earthquake in the first place.

If there is a moment when the American and global publics could be forced to confront this dynamic it will be when George Clooney and other often-outspoken Hollywood stars, joined by Haitian-born hip-hop legend Wyclef Jean and other musical artists, take to the airwaves to raise money for the country.

Illusion of reconstruction

Haiti certainly needs all the foreign aid it can get in this time of desperation. But if the telethon limits itself to showing heartbreaking images and calling for humanitarian aid without calling on the Obama administration, the UN and the world more broadly to address the structural dynamics that produced this disaster and radically reorient their policies towards Haiti, there is little doubt that most of the funds raised will wind up lining the pockets of the corrupt local elite and their US and international corporate and NGO allies.

Ordinary Haitians will continue to suffer, reconstruction will be an illusion or confined to tourist destinations far from Port-au-Prince and the country will be ripe for the next man-made natural disaster.

Friday is a chance for artists to assume their historically crucial role of speaking the truth to power and to the people, even when it is hard to digest.

It will be interesting to see if Clooney, and artists such as Bono and Sting who have advocated so eloquently in the past for the rights of the poor and oppressed, use their immense social capital to educate the public and challenge political and corporate leaders finally to behave in a morally responsible manner towards a country that has known little hope, and even less justice, since its people began their still unfinished struggle for freedom and independence over two centuries ago.

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