

One Year Since the Earthquake in Haiti

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Today marks the first anniversary of the magnitude 7.0 earthquake that devastated the impoverished Caribbean nation of Haiti, leaving a quarter of a million of its people dead, more than 300,000 injured, and approximately a million and a half homeless.

One year after this natural disaster, the horrors facing Haiti's population have only deepened, with a cholera epidemic claiming thousands of lives and a million left stranded in squalid tent camps.

This festering crisis underscores the social and political sources of the suffering inflicted upon Haiti's working class and oppressed masses. That such conditions prevail virtually on the doorstep of the United States, which concentrates the greatest share of the world's wealth, constitutes a crime of world historic proportions and an indictment of the profit system.

Those familiar with the conditions on the ground in Haiti provide an appalling account of the indifference and neglect of American and world imperialism toward the country's people.

"The mountains of rubble still exist; the plight of the victims without any sign of acceptable temporary shelter is worsening the conditions for the spread of cholera, and the threat of new epidemics becomes more frightening with each passing day," said former Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson, the Caribbean community's special representative to Haiti. "In short, there has been no abatement of the trauma and misery which the Haitian populace has suffered."

Roland Van Hauwermeiren, country director for the NGO Oxfam in Haiti, described 2010 as "a year of indecision" that had "put Haiti's recovery on hold." He added, "Nearly one million people are still living in tents or under tarpaulins and hundreds of thousands of others who are living in the city's ruins still do not know when they will be able to return home."

Of the approximately one million people living in makeshift tents or under tarps in the crowded camps of Port-au-Prince, more than half are children.

The Haitian capital remains buried in rubble. It is estimated that less than 5 percent of the debris has been cleared by Haitian workers attacking the mountains of fallen concrete and twisted metal with shovels and their bare hands. Heavy equipment has not been present in any significant amount since the withdrawal of the US military more than six months ago.

At its height, the US deployed some 22,000 soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen in Haiti, seizing unilateral control of the country's main airport, port facilities and other strategic facilities. The US military's priority was to secure the country against the threat of popular

upheaval and to deploy a Coast Guard and naval force to prevent Haitian refugees from making their way to the US.

To those ends, in the critical first weeks after the earthquake when aid was most needed to prevent loss of life and limb for the hundreds of thousands of injured, the Pentagon repeatedly turned away planes carrying medical aid and personnel in order to keep runways free for US military assets.

Within just 11 days of the earthquake, the US-backed Haitian government of President Rene Preval declared the search and rescue operation over—with only 132 people having been pulled alive from the rubble. Had an adequate response been organized, many more could have been saved. Decisions were taken in Washington based not on humanitarian considerations, but rather on the cold calculus of national interests and profits. Undoubtedly, this included the calculation that rescuing injured Haitians would only create a further drain on resources.

In contrast, the spontaneous response of the people of the United States and the entire world was one of solidarity with the suffering Haitian masses. An unprecedented outpouring of support yielded \$1.3 billion in contributions from the US alone, the vast majority of it coming from ordinary working people.

One year later, however, just 38 percent of those funds have actually been spent to aid in the recovery and rebuilding of Haiti, according to a survey by the Chronicle of Philanthropy. In Haiti, there are widespread suspicions that vast amounts of money have been diverted into the coffers of NGOs and aid organizations.

Even worse is the response of governments. At a donors' conference convened in March of last year, more than \$5.3 billion was pledged. Of that, only \$824 million has been delivered. Worst of all is the response of Washington, which pledged \$1.15 billion for 2010, only to subsequently announce that it was postponing payment of virtually the entire pledge until 2011.

Last July, former US President Bill Clinton, who serves as the Obama administration's envoy to Haiti, the UN's special envoy to the country and the co-chair together with Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive of the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission (IHRC), expressed frustration over the slow pace of the payments and promised to pressure donors to make good on their promises. Apparently he has had little success in this effort, including with his own wife, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. He has repeatedly made it clear that the only acceptable path to Haiti's reconstruction lies through private investment and the assurance of profitable conditions—based largely on starvation wages—for US-based banks and transnationals.

On top of the earthquake's devastation has come an epidemic of cholera, which has already claimed 3,600 lives and is expected to infect at least 400,000 people. Public health experts acknowledge that the spread of the disease has still not peaked, yet the terrible toll of this disease merits barely a mention in the US media.

The Obama administration's indifference to Haitian life has been underscored by the decision to resume deportations to the country, with 350 Haitians slated to be sent back this month. With many of these people destined for incarceration in Haitian jails, which are rampant with cholera, the action amounts to a death sentence.

The epidemic is not a product of the earthquake, but rather, like the extraordinarily high death toll from the quake itself, the outcome of grinding poverty and backwardness resulting from the domination of Haiti by imperialism and, in particular, the role played by the US government and American banks and corporations over the past century.

Haiti is by far the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Even before the earthquake, less than half of the urban population and less than a fifth of those in rural areas had access to sanitation, leaving the country vulnerable to cholera. Prior to the quake, nearly three quarters of the Haitian populace was living on less than \$2 a day, while barely 20 percent had jobs in the formal economy and 86 percent of urban dwellers were housed in slums.

These conditions are inextricably bound up with an oppressive political and social order that was forged through the US military occupation from 1915 to 1934, the savage 30-year dictatorship of the US-backed Duvalier dynasty, and the subsequent enforcement of so-called "liberal free market" policies by Washington and the International Monetary Fund.

The growing frustration and anger of the Haitian people over the criminal policies of Washington and the country's narrow and corrupt financial elite have erupted repeatedly in mass resistance in recent months, first against the United Nations troops over the spread of cholera and then in response to the fraudulent November 28 election.

This popular resistance deserves the full support of working people in the US and internationally. The demand must be raised for immediate and massive aid to Haiti.

But 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 by 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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