

The Haitian Disaster in a Historical Context

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In-depth Report: [HAITI](#)

A devastating earthquake, the worst in 200 years, struck Port-au-Prince on the 12th of January 0, laying waste to the city and killed many thousands of people. The quake detonated more than 30 aftershocks throughout the night to the following morning.

It toppled houses, hotels, hospitals and even the capital city's main political buildings, including the presidential palace. The collapse of so many structures sent a giant cloud into the sky, which hovered over the city, raining dust down onto the wasteland below. Estimated 200,000 people have died, in a metropolis of 2 million people and those that survived are living in the streets, afraid to return inside any building that remains standing.

The immediate suffering in Haiti is the result of a natural disaster of biblical proportion. It is also compounded by political disasters of the past two centuries, and the considerable responsibility for those disasters lies not only with the politically penury Haitian elites but also with western, particularly US policymakers. The media coverage of the earthquake is marked by an almost complete separation of the disaster from the social and political history of Haiti.

Haiti is seen as simply another "failed state" to be pitied and in need of international intervention. Few people remember that Haiti has a glorious past.

Journalists have noted that a slave revolt led to the founding of an independent Haiti in 1804 and made a passing reference on how France's subsequent demand for reparations (to compensate the French for their lost of property and slaves) crippled Haiti economically for more than a century. Some journalists have even pointed out that while it was a slave society, the United States backed France in that cruel policy and didnt recognise Haiti independence until the Civil War.

Occasional references also have been made to the 1915 U.S. invasion under the liberal Woodrow Wilson and an occupation that lasted until 1934, and support the US government gave to the two brutal Duvalier dictatorships (the infamous Papa Doc and Baby Doc) that ravaged the country from 1957-86. Today theres little discussion of how the problems of contemporary Haiti can be traced to those policies. It is thus important that a brief history of the resilient nation of Haiti is offered in order to contextualise the unfolding tragedy.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Haiti, in those days Saint Domingue, was France's richest colony. Haiti's sugar-plantations and Haiti's African slaves provided the economic backbone and renaissance of France. After the fall of the Bastille, which ushered the institutional domination of capital, both Haiti's white slave-owners and emancipated Haitian mulattoes sent representatives to the revolutionary convention in Paris. Haiti's slave and plantation owners were relieved that the French monarchy and French commercial

controls had collapsed which opened up an interesting new market in the neighbouring United States. Haiti's mulattoes were enthralled by French revolutionary principles. A Haitian mulatto leader, Lacombe, insisted that freedom, brotherhood and equality were principles which ought to be observed also in Haiti. He was immediately hanged by irate French slave owners.

Haiti's popular majority, hundreds of thousands of African slaves, sent no representatives to revolutionary Paris. Instead they organised themselves, using the cover of voodoo sessions, which were tolerated by French plantation owners who thought their slaves were merely gathering to dance and worship their African gods. Haiti's slaves were modernised proletariats brought together by their work on the big plantations. And they too heard the rumours from France and the signals of the revolution.

The first Haitian slave rebellion took place in the month of August 1791. Twelve thousand slaves in the northern parts of Saint Domingue rose up, ransacked the plantations and hanged their oppressors on the nearest palm trees. And this is where Toussaint Louverture, Haiti's revolutionary leader, enters world history. He was a literate, black supervisor on a slave plantation where his French master seems to have been fairly tolerant and was protected by Toussaint against rebellious slaves.

For a while Toussaint was seen as a benign slave collaborator, but he had realised that the slaves needed military organisation. He raised a black army and had the satisfaction of defeating two European invasions. First he defeated the troops sent out by revolutionary France to quell the slave rebellion. After that he defeated one hundred thousand British soldiers, dispatched by Prime Minister William Pitt the younger. The invaders were thoroughly beaten by Haiti's African defenders and by yellow fever.

In France, especially the Jacobins showed a great deal of sympathy for revolutionary Haiti, and in 1793 slavery was banned. However, after assuming power, the First Consul, Napoléon Bonaparte, decided to reintroduce slavery and, as he put it, "rip the epaulettes off the shoulders of the Negroes". Napoléon sent new invading forces. Haiti did survive as an independent nation but was under perpetual pressure from France, England, United States and Spain. Toussaint Louverture eventually died in a French dungeon.

Even more glaring is the absence of a discussion of more recent Haiti-US relations, especially US support for the two coups (1991 and 2004) against a democratically elected president. Jean-Bertrand Aristide won a stunning victory in 1990 by articulating the aspirations of Haiti's poorest citizens, and his populist economic program irritated both Haitian elites and U.S. policy-makers.

The George Bush (Senior) administration nominally condemned the 1991 military coup but gave tacit support to the generals. US President, Bill Clinton eventually helped Aristide return to power in Haiti in 1994, but not until the Haitian leader had been forced to capitulate to business-friendly economic policies demanded by the United States.

When Aristide won another election in 2000 the George W Bush (Junior) administration blocked crucial loans to his government and supported the violent reactionary forces attacking Aristide's party. The sad conclusion to that policy came in 2004 when the US military effectively kidnapped Aristide and flew him out of the country.

Aristide today is our guest in South Africa, blocked by the United States from returning to his

country, where he still has many supporters and could help in the relief efforts.

Exactly two weeks after the disaster, government ministers, international bankers and aid agencies gathered in Montreal, Canada, to discuss plans for 'reconstructing' earthquake-ravaged Haiti, a project that the theorist Naomi Klein has prudently termed 'Disaster Capital'. At the heart of the proposal in Montreal is the recolonization of Haiti and brutal exploitation of its people. Haiti is now being run by the US military which has deployed over 13,000 troops and unilaterally taken control of the countrys airport and port facilities.

The Pentagon dominates the provision of relief which it has subordinated to the number one priority of deploying combat-equipped US soldiers and Marines, much to the detriment of injured and hungry Haitians waiting for life-saving medical supplies and food. Behind the talk of Haiti's 'reconstruction', what is being discussed is a plan worked out in the months before the earthquake that is dictated by the profit interests of US banks and corporations, together with those of Haitis wealthy elite.

Speaking to reporters en route from Washington to Montreal, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to this plan, 'Disaster Capital', while praising the work of her husband, former President Bill Clinton, in seeking to implement it in his position as United Nations envoy to Haiti. He had just had a conference with 500 businesspeople, she said. They were signing contracts, they were making investments.

She continued: So we have a plan. It is a legitimate plan. It was done in conjunction with other international donors, with the United Nations. And I dont want to start from scratch, but we have to recognise the changed challenges we are now confronting.

The plan, worked up at the behest of the UN last year, is aimed at expanding the Haitian economy through the development of free trade zones based on garment sweatshops in which Haitian workers would be paid near-starvation wages. The initiative is based on a report prepared for the UN last year by Oxford University economics professor Paul Collier.

The report perversely cast Haitis poverty - the deepest in the Western Hemisphere - as its number one asset in the global capitalist economy. Due to its poverty and relatively unregulated labour market, Haiti has labour costs that are fully competitive with China, which is the global benchmark, Collier wrote. This asset is something that both Washington and Haitis parasitical ruling elite have jealously guarded.

Former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was overthrown twice - in 1991 and 2004 - in bloody coups orchestrated by the CIA in conjunction with Haitian factory owners, in large measure for proposing to raise the countrys minimum wage.

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