

Washington Shuts Door on Haitian Refugees

By [Tom Eley](#)

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The Obama administration has taken extraordinary measures to prevent desperate Haitians from entering the US since a January 12 earthquake devastated the Caribbean nation, killing an estimated 200,000, making at least 1.5 million homeless, and orphaning 1 million children. The effort to bar Haitians from entering the US—including the wounded seeking medical treatment—illustrates that the priority of the US-led intervention is not to save lives, but to establish military control over the population.

Five US Coast Guard ships have joined US Navy vessels deployed off Haiti's coast—not to deliver food, water, and medicine to the sick and dying, but to stop any Haitians who might attempt to escape. Coast Guard commander Chris O'Neil told the New York Times that anyone fleeing Haiti would be seized and sent back, but that so far his units have witnessed no attempts. "None, zero," O'Neil said, "and no indication of anyone making preparations to do so."

US officials say there is little evidence of Haitians leaving for the US, but "they worry that in the coming weeks, worsening conditions in Haiti could spur an exodus." That US officials are planning for "worsening conditions" in Haiti over the "coming weeks"—beyond the desperate situation that prevails there now—is a damning admission that Washington has no intention to make available widespread relief, much less rebuild Haiti.

The Obama administration is also making plans to incarcerate Haitians who might attempt the dangerous sea voyage to the US, which every year claims the lives of hundreds. Officials told the Times they are "laying plans to scoop up any boats carrying illegal immigrants and send them to Guantánamo Bay"—the US military base in Cuba notorious for the abuse of "terror suspects". The Department of Homeland Security has announced it will clear out space in its south Florida deportation prison, the Krome Service Processing Center, in case of an influx of Haitians.

State Department spokesman Noel Clay announced the US would not relax its visa requirements for Haitians. The strict visa policy extends to the earthquake's estimated one million orphans—10 percent of Haiti's population. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said Monday that the US will take a handful of orphans on "humanitarian parole." The policy applies to those who were documented orphans before the earthquake and who were already slated to be adopted by US families. On Monday, about 50 Haitian children already cleared for adoption in the US arrived at the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Children's Hospital, after their orphanage collapsed in the earthquake.

The State Department has gone so far as to refuse visas for sick and dying Haitians seeking treatment at an emergency field hospital adjacent to Miami's airport. Dr. William O'Neill, dean of the University of Miami medical school, which established the hospital, called the

callous policy “beyond insane.” The State Department is headed by Secretary Hillary Clinton, who, along with her husband former President Bill Clinton, has postured as a friend to Haiti’s earthquake survivors.

The measures to stop Haitians from seeking refuge in the US border on the sadistic. While the US has refused to allow numerous relief flights to land at the Port-au-Prince airport, each day, a US Air Force cargo plane has circled for hours above Haiti’s desperate population broadcasting the following Creole-language radio message: “Listen, don’t rush on boats to leave the country. If you do that, we’ll all have even worse problems. Because, I’ll be honest with you: If you think you will reach the US and all the doors will be wide open to you, that’s not at all the case. And they will intercept you right on the water and send you back home where you came from.”

The Miami Herald reported Tuesday that the US has banned commercial flights from Haiti, not because of damage to the airport, but because potential passengers cannot be screened against terrorist watch-lists and put through metal detectors. Spirit Airlines and American Airlines have been flying cargo and relief workers into Port-au-Prince since last Wednesday, but their flights return “with hundreds of empty seats.” An exception came Monday, when a few dozen US college students and Fox reporter Geraldo Rivera were granted a security clearance by the State Department and flown back on Spirit.

Spirit and American say they have been flooded with requests from people attempting to buy tickets to fly out and are losing revenue. “People are always calling us” for Haiti flights, Spirit spokeswoman Misty Pinson told the Herald. “We’re inundated.”

The State Department has exempted private charter flights from Haiti from the “anti-terror” requirements. These firms can call in the names of passengers who rent airplanes for as much as \$4,000 an hour or can afford \$1,000 for a one-way ticket to Florida.

The sheer indifference and cruelty of the US embargo against Haitians coming to the US was underscored by an on-the-spot report broadcast Tuesday by CBS radio news describing thousands of Port-au-Prince residents crowding the beach in a desperate effort to board already overcrowded ferries.

The US efforts to keep out Haitian refugees stands in sharp contrast to its efforts, led by Bill Clinton, to promote the relocation of cheap-labor garment industry sweatshops in Haiti. The extreme poverty in Haiti is the result of decades of American capitalism’s domination.

US workers must reject the latest attempt to victimize the Haitians and demand they be allowed to settle in the US with full rights.

Meanwhile, the rescue operation—the ostensible purpose for the US military presence— has proven such a debacle that even the media has been forced to make note of its obvious failure to deliver food, water, and medicine to the Haitian people.

Very quickly after the earthquake, the US military seized the airport at Port-au-Prince and took control of the capital city’s largely destroyed harbor. Naval and Coast Guard flotillas were rapidly deployed to Haiti’s waters. Thousands of soldiers have been dispatched.

Yet not only has the US military failed to provide significant relief to Haitians over the past week, during which time tens of thousands have died beneath collapsed buildings or due to

the ongoing absence of food, water, and basic medicine. It has actually played a counterproductive role, ordering away dozens of relief flights from aid organization and other countries.

The US military claims that the flight diversions resulted from congestion at the airport. Yet 40 percent of all landing flights have been military—one of these evidently being the Air Force Cargo plane that has every day circled above the nation warning Haitians not to go to the US.

The decision to order away flights carrying doctors, nurses, and supplies has doubtless resulted in thousands of deaths. Doctors Without Borders said that over the weekend five of its flights were not allowed to land in Haiti, but were diverted to the Dominican Republic. Benoit Leduc, operations head of the organization, said the resulting delays cost “hundreds of lives.” The Red Cross also said its planes were not allowed to land over the weekend.

In a Tuesday press release, Doctors Without Borders said that its planes are still being turned away. A cargo plane carrying 12 tons of equipment, drugs, and surgical supplies has been delayed three times since Sunday night, according to the release.

The hundreds of military flights that have landed have provided little assistance. Were there evidence of US soldiers delivering humanitarian aid, it is certain that the US media would broadcast it relentlessly. Some soldiers say they have yet to leave their warships and airport base; they “have, for the most part, not been a major presence on the streets,” as the New York Times charitably put it.

An exception came Tuesday morning, when the media broadcast images of US army helicopters landing in front of the toppled National Palace, where tens of thousands of Haitians had been waiting for nearly a week with virtually no aid. Soldiers distributed relief supplies, but they appeared also to be setting up a command center, symbolically, in the very seat of the Haitian government.

The US embassy in Haiti claims it has not been able to deliver needed supplies “because of security,” the implication being that rescue workers’ lives are endangered by “looting” Haitians. In fact, there has not been a single reported case of aid workers being attacked by Haitians. As Tuesday’s Wall Street Journal notes, “US officials have blamed security concerns for holding up providing relief. Yet a team of Cuban doctors were seen Monday treating hundreds of patients without a gun or soldier in sight.”

Even if such dangers existed, this would only beg the question of what the US military is doing in Haiti if its thousands of soldiers are neither delivering supplies nor “providing security” to those who would.

Given the mounting evidence that it is impeding rescue operations, the military was compelled on Tuesday to deny the obvious nature of its mission in Haiti. “There have been some reports and news stories out there that the US is invading Haiti,” US Army Colonel Kane said. “We’re not invading Haiti. That’s ludicrous. This is humanitarian relief.”

Col. Kane delivered his comments to reporters at Port-au-Prince airport, “which has come to resemble an American military base, with helicopters coming and going continually,” according to the Times. What is left of Haiti’s government is consigned to a meeting place at a police department adjacent to the airport.

The international military presence in Haiti, led by the US, continued to grow on Tuesday. US and international soldiers were granted the authority to police the population by a Haiti government decree put in place yesterday at the bidding of Secretary of State Clinton.

The US force in Haiti and offshore is expected to rise to 11,000 in the coming days. The Pentagon said that the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit would soon begin landing west of Port-au-Prince.

Canadian soldiers number about 2,000, and are deploying in the devastated towns of Leogane and Jacmel, close to the epicenter of the earthquake southwest of Port-au-Prince. Canada has sent two warships, which will be joined by naval vessels from Italy, Spain, and Venezuela in the coming days.

The United Nations Security Council, meeting in New York on Tuesday, approved sending 3,500 more soldiers and police to Haiti, bringing the total UN force to 10,500.

While more soldiers arrived, international rescue efforts continued to fall far short of meeting the needs of Haiti's hungry, thirsty, and sick. These efforts have seen "only a trickle of promised aid reach hundreds of thousands of Haitians in desperate need," was the Guardian's assessment of Tuesday's efforts.

Search for survivors under collapsed buildings led by international teams have resulted in only 90 rescues to date, according to the UN. Hope is fading, but two women were pulled from the wreckage of a university building on Tuesday, and rescue teams using high-tech equipment detected the sounds of beating hearts in a collapsed bank.

In spite of testimony from experts that victims may still be clinging to life under the ruins of Haiti's cities and towns, the US military said it was time to end search and rescue efforts. "We fully expect that we will transition very soon from the search phase to the recovery phase," said Marine General Daniel Allyn, deputy commander of the US forces in Haiti.

The Rome-based World Food Program (WFP) said that thus far a mere 250,000 daily food rations have been distributed, about half of these made available by the US military. The WFP managed to distribute only about 50,000 rations on Monday, about half of what it had planned. The US began on Tuesday to distribute pallets of food and water through airdrops. In the first week after the crisis, the Pentagon refused to consider airdrops, saying they would cause riots.

Reporters relate scenes of horror and fear in Port-au-Prince. Tens of thousands of Haitians are fleeing the capital city for the countryside, packed into buses and on foot and boat. Dump trucks unload hundreds of bodies into mass graves.

Because of the lack of antibiotics and other medical supplies, a large number of crude amputations are being performed, many without morphine or pain killers, which are in short supply. Desperate doctors and nurses continued to appeal for anesthetics, scalpels, and saws to amputate crushed limbs, according to the Associated Press. A Doctors Without Borders representative said surgeons at its emergency hospital in Cite Soleil were forced to go to a market for a handsaw to perform amputations after another of its cargo planes was turned away by the US military.

"It's been amputate or die," Dr. Nancy Snyderman, who is working relief in Haiti, told NBC. "Secondary infections are huge. It's the number one cause of death right now."

“In a country where survival is so tough, for an amputee, it’s nearly impossible. Its raises the question of what’s going to happen?,” Snyderman asked. “There are no prosthetics for a country that may soon be a country of orphans and amputees.”

“I saw babies whose skulls had been cracked open like watermelons,” she added. “The best doctors could do is put a wrap around their heads and cover them and leave them to die.”

Washington’s indifference to these horrors is palpable. After viewing surgeons sterilize equipment with vodka, Bill Clinton, titular head of the relief effort, declared, “It’s astonishing what the Haitians have been able to accomplish.”

Prior to Clinton’s visit, the hospital was secured by about 100 US paratroopers, Agence France Presse reported. The paratroopers drove back desperate crowds of Haitians from the hospital’s doors.

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Articles by: [Tom Eley](#)

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