

What Next for Haiti as “Recovery” Replaces Relief?

As Media Coverage Fades, Urgent Issues On The Disaster Go Uncovered

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UN Takes Over Aid Distribution; Admits Effort Has Been a Failure

Haiti is already fading from the headlines. The desperation of the population in what was called the “rescue” phase of the relief effort is giving way to ‘silver-lining” talk of recovery and rebuilding.

Even as the death count mounts, this apocalyptic disaster no longer has the ability to shock, perhaps because of media overexposure. The media well of compassion—fueled by images of lovable orphans and live extractions of half-dead individuals from the rubble,, is running dry as a ‘been there, done that’ feeling sets in among TV execs who sense that the audience will soon become jaded and turn away.

Perhaps that’s why the story turned quickly from the dead and dying to celebrities telling Larry King how much money they are donating. Perhaps that’s why the plight of sympathetic children took center-stage.

The reporters who have been there are all tired, and in some cases traumatized because of the vast needs they saw. However, most were gentle in chronicling the pathetic delivery of food and water despite the amazing outpouring of sympathy and generosity. Recently a homeless shelter in Baltimore donated \$14.64.

Because of the suffering they have shown us, much of it as character-based human interest vignettes, correspondents seemed to have had little airtime for investigating what history might someday indict as an incompetent, if not criminally negligent, aid response,

For weeks, there were so many basic questions left unexplored like how much was being spent. where it was it going and whether it git there. We were given impressions, but little real information.

There was blame for the most powerless player in this drama, the Haitian government, which had lost most of its infrastructure, but little scrutiny of the most powerful, the lead agency, the US military which took over the airport and made security—i.e. bringing troops and vehicles- a more important priority than distributing food and medical supplies. On Sunday The NY Times reported the system was changed because this approach had “failed.” and at a cost of a still unknown number of lives.

“The new program ... ends what officials described as the “quick and dirty” initial phase of emergency response, but it is also an admission of what Haitians were saying for days: that the system failed to reach those who

needed it and was often exploited by those it did reach.”

On Saturday it was reported that the military had stopped emergency flights of badly wounded Haitians to US hospitals because questions were raised about who would pay for their care.

The Wall Street Journal carried a report from three New York doctors comparing the mishaps in Haiti to Katrina. There was a report that the trailer industry wanted to ship 20,000 unsafe trailers first used in Katrina relief to Haiti. According to one report, “Haitian Culture and Communications Minister Marie Laurence Jocelyn Lassegue said “I don’t think we would use them. I don’t think we would accept them.”

It wasn’t surprising to learn from the Associated Press that out of every dollar of US government aid, 33 cents went to the military and only ONE cent went to Haiti’s government. Many observers contend that only Haitian leaders can provide services over the long term, but they have not been given sufficient support. Dr. Paul Farmer who runs one of the most effective Health projects there told the US Senate that communications minister Lassegue was left without a cell phone and he had to give her his.

No mainstream outlets reminded the audience that the country’s elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide was sent packing by a US backed coup mounted in the name of imposing order. Few reviewed the history of Washington’s occupations and support for dictators as a reason for why the country was kept so poor and unable to run a relief effort when they needed to.

As Robert Jensen put it, the world was treated to hours of good television but bad reporting. The media did not expose the lack of disaster relief experience by the Pentagon, under the command of a general who once ran Ronald Reagan’s contra war.

They focused on feel-good/feel-bad human interest reports—sad and/or upbeat—to stoke empathy and spur donations, not on any analysis of who was running things and how well. Reference was made to “bottlenecks” caused by bad roads, not inadequate plans and inept management by military men with no experience in running disaster relief.

Journalist Glen Ford who edits the Black Agenda Report charges calculated malice, arguing their mission has always been more about control than care.

“When the U.S. decided to airlift thousands of troops into Port au Prince, commanders knew the logistical needs of that force, alone, would overwhelm the airport’s capacity, leaving little room for actual relief supplies. The Americans knew they would be creating a bottleneck that would become an impediment to relief efforts by the rest of the world. But they hogged the air and runways, anyway.”

Americans here meanwhile were being told how grateful the Haitians were. President Obama cited aid recipients chanting “USA, USA,” an event I did not see reported anywhere. Instead, the overseas press is filled with complaints about aid not reaching people in need.”

Why didn’t journalists consult with the people who know Haiti best and get their views on why this all went so badly and what to do? Some Haitians believe it was deliberate because

driving the poor out of the capital is seen by the elite as key to remaking the country in its image.

Other stories might feature the cruise ships that still bring tourists to barbecues on a lovely beach even as the country writhes in pain. And what about more reporting on the deep inequality between a Haitian elite that lived in affluence while most of the population survived on \$2 a day. Members of this elite began meeting daily the day after the quake to start planning reconstruction because, as a Haitian-American banker told me, “that’s where the real money is.”

The Boston Globe reported, “The gap in incomes in Haiti is even more pronounced in the aftermath of the earthquake. The wealthy have been able to send loved ones overseas, seek refuge in armed compounds powered by generators, and even order pizza and surf the Internet.”

Already there have been calls to privatize Haiti’s phone system, and restructure ports. Among the US companies being lined up for contracts reportedly are General Electric (GE), Caterpillar (CAT), Deere (DE), Fluor (FLR), and Jacobs Engineering (JEC).

Speaking of money, why not an investigation into the companies that make billions off the remittances that Haitians in the diaspora send to their families that couldn’t survive without them.

At last, more critical voices are beginning to be heard from NGO’s and activists, even as the emergency program that was so screwed up when it was needed most has been restructured. The questions I and a few others were raising about this disaster in the disaster have been finally acknowledged by shifts in procedure, in practice, but not with any admissions of culpability.

A recent visit by black personalities including Jesse Jackson, Harry Belafonte, and Danny Glover produced a scathing report endorsed by Haitian NGO’s arguing that the security emphasis was misplaced. That emphasis was part of initiative brought to Haiti by Secretary of State Clinton who recommended that the government impose an emergency decree allowing the imposition of curfews and martial law, which she said the US military would be willing to implement.

During her visit, the airport was shut down to all relief flights for 3 hours. Of course, officials cited fears of looting.

They know that the people’s patience is not open ended especially when stomachs rumble and children cry. Even the dogs are reportedly starving.

John Kerry’s Senate committee held hearings on what to do on February 28. They heard from a prominent Haitian public health official, a consultant for the Pentagon contracting Rand Corporation, and Dr. Paul Farmer who has been in and out of Haiti for 30 years and created the universally respected Partners in Health organization. He is now a deputy UN envoy there.

All of these witnesses made important points about how the aid effort will take a long time—years—cost billions, and must not be run by the US military or even the volunteer-driven NGO’s of which Haiti has an abundance. The UN must become the central player—it actually has team of disaster relief specialists including air traffic controllers.

Farmer was very strong in urging more resources and support for Haiti's government. He challenged the conventional "wisdom" which says the government is corrupt noting how it has been undervalued and unsupported. He called for hiring Haitians at decent wages to provide services and rebuild with locals instead of outsourcing or relying on foreign contractors.

These jobs will bring much needed economic security. He also said bluntly, no doubt based on years of experience in the field, that the international NGO's also need to be supervised and held to a code of conduct with higher ethical and professional standards and be accountable to a coordinated plan. Those that won't play by the rules should not be allowed to stay, he added, drawing on his experience in Africa,

Haiti cannot be rebuilt without the full participation of Haitians, he said, and they should be in charge. He also endorsed calls that Haiti's \$1 billion dollar debt be forgiven.

The media coverage to date has been missing this type of fact-based and experience driven framework. It's been organized around images, not investigations.

Sadly, tragedies like the one in Haiti require better and more explanatory coverage just as the media packs up and heads to the next disaster if not to face pink slips in new rounds of news cutbacks.

Danny Schechter, *News Dissector*, has directed a new film, *Plunder The Crime Of Our Time* about the financial crisis as a crime story. (plunderthecrimeofourtime.com.) Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org

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