

Hundreds of thousands feared dead in Haiti

By Bill Van Auken
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Officials warned Wednesday that the earthquake that devastated the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince may have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, as the city's residents piled corpses in the street and dug through the rubble for survivors.

Measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale, the earthquake was the most devastating to hit the impoverished Caribbean island nation in 240 years. With its epicenter barely 9 miles from Port-au-Prince, a city of 2 million, and its source relatively close to the surface, the earthquake inflicted immense damage.

Thousands of buildings, ranging from shantytown dwellings and schools to the Presidential Palace, government ministries and the five-story Hotel Christoph, headquarters of the United Nations peace-keeping forces in the country, collapsed, many with occupants inside them. According to some estimates, 75 percent of the city's structures were reduced to rubble.

"More than 100,000 are dead," Felix Augustin, Haiti's consul general at the United Nations, told reporters Wednesday.

Haiti's prime minister, Jean-Max Bellerive, told CNN that "several hundred thousand may have died," the cable news network reported.

"Because we have so [many] people on the streets right now, we don't know exactly where they were living. But so many, so many buildings, so many neighborhoods totally destroyed, and some neighborhoods we don't even see people," CNN quoted Bellerive as saying.

CNN's Gary Tuchman, one of the first US reporters on the scene, reported seeing corpses covered with sheets lining the streets and "truckloads of bodies."

"There are absolutely no police, fire, emergency authorities on the scene, as the search for survivors continues," he said. Haitian civilians frantically dug through the rubble with their bare hands in areas that they believed people could be trapped.

Reuters news agency described the scene in Port-au-Prince: "Sobbing and dazed people wandered the streets of Port-au-Prince, and voices cried out from the rubble. 'Please take me out, I am dying. I have two children with me,' a woman told a Reuters journalist from under a collapsed kindergarten in the Canape-Vert area of the capital."

Among the cruelest effects of the earthquake was the destruction of all of the city's hospitals. The humanitarian aid group Doctors Without Borders reported that all three of the

facilities to which it normally refers patients are so severely damaged that they are unusable.

"The level of care we can now provide without that infrastructure is very limited," said the group's spokesman in Toronto. "The best we can offer them at the moment is first-aid care and stabilization. The reality of what we're seeing is severe traumas—head wounds, crushed limbs—severe problems that cannot be dealt with at the level of care we currently have available with no infrastructure really to support it."

The Red Cross in Haiti reports that it has run out of medicine. The agency estimates that some 3 million Haitians have been affected by the tragedy.

Meanwhile, aftershocks have continued to shake the city and the surrounding areas.

"Experts fear the worst could still be to come in Haiti," reported the Financial Times of London. "There will be aftershocks for many weeks," said David Kerridge, head of earth hazards at the British Geological Survey; "there is a strong possibility of landslides, which may have caused many casualties in more remote parts of the island."

The earthquake is the latest and the most severe in a series of natural disasters that have struck Haiti. The country has still not recovered from four hurricanes and tropical storms that swept through the island in 2008.

These natural disasters come on top of, and their effects are brutally amplified by, the disaster created by capitalism and more than a century of imperialist oppression in this, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Haiti's gross domestic product stood at \$7 billion in 2008, roughly one third the amount that the Wall Street finance house Goldman Sachs set aside for 2009 year-end bonuses. According to World Bank figures, more than half of the population barely survives on less than \$1 a day, while over two thirds of the Haitian people subsist on less than \$2.

Life expectancy for Haitian men is little over 50.

Blackouts were daily occurrences in the Haitian capital before the earthquake. And, according to the World Health Organization, not a single Haitian city has a public sewage system and half the population lacks access to clean drinking water.

Now there is no electricity and no phone communication, water is running out in many areas, and the threat of infectious disease could produce many more victims.

In 2004, the United Nations secretariat that focuses on disaster relief pointed to this combined effect of natural and socio-economic disasters:

“The impact of the hazards is much greater in Haiti because the vulnerability of people there is higher. Rapid urbanization, lack of land management, the exploitation of charcoal and consequent deforestation make Haitian people more vulnerable to mudslides.”

The head of the secretariat, Salvano Briceño, said at the time: “What is happening in Haiti is an illustration of a combination of vulnerabilities that was bound to happen. Vulnerabilities have been allowed to grow in Haiti in proportions such that any natural hazard would lead to great disaster.”

He urged international agencies and the world’s governments to invest in aiding Haiti to build up its infrastructure so that it could be prepared to deal with disasters, rather than relying only on relief after the fact.

Instead, the United Nations sent thousands of troops, led by the Brazilian army, to occupy the impoverished nation and impose “law and order” in the wake of a US-backed coup that overthrew the elected government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. An estimated 8,000 Haitians were killed in the period of the coup, many at the hands of right-wing gunmen, some of them trained by the CIA.

This was only the latest in a long series of US interventions aimed at maintaining Washington’s domination of the country and suppressing any movement of the masses to transform the oppressive social and economic conditions.

The US militarily occupied the country from 1915 to 1934, withdrawing its troops only after creating a Haitian army that kept a repressive grip on the political life of the country for decades to come. Washington likewise backed the 30-year dictatorship of the Duvaliers—Papa Doc and Baby Doc—whose victims number in the tens of thousands.

The US media has no interest in this history. Haiti’s poverty is presented merely as a fact of life, with the implication that it is the fault of the Haitians themselves. (Televangelist Pat Robertson, the founder of the Christian Coalition and a leading figure in the US Christian Right, offered his own explanation. The Haitians, he affirmed, had succeeded in overthrowing French rule, freeing themselves from slavery and establishing the first black republic only thanks to a “pact with the devil,” and they have been punished for it ever since.)

US President Barack Obama issued a sanctimonious statement on the Haitian catastrophe Wednesday.

“The reports and images that we’ve seen of collapsed hospitals, crumbled homes, and men and women carrying their injured neighbors through the streets are truly heart-wrenching,” he said. “Indeed, for a country and a people who are no strangers to hardship and suffering, this tragedy seems especially cruel and incomprehensible.” With the Haitian disaster, he added, “we are reminded of the common humanity that we all share.”

If Obama wanted to be moved by such images to a feeling of “common humanity,” he needn’t have waited until the magnitude 7 quake hit Port-au-Prince. He could have viewed similar images from the homes and villages hit by Predator missiles in Pakistan, or those bombed by US warplanes in Afghanistan and Yemen, not to mention the massive death and destruction that the US military visited upon Iraq.

The US government’s response to the Haitian catastrophe is largely military, the first elements on the scene being Coast Guard ships that are normally deployed to catch Haitian migrants seeking to flee the oppressive conditions in their country.

They are to be followed by the USS Vinson, an aircraft carrier, and other warships. And the deployment of US troops in the country—once again—is in the planning stages.

The chief of the US Southern Command, General Douglas Fraser, told reporters Wednesday that the Pentagon had “put various forces around the armed forces on alert,” adding that the military may send “a large-deck amphibious ship that will have a Marine expeditionary unit embarked on that.” CBS News reported that the deployment was being planned “for security purposes.”

In the first decade of the last century, during the heyday of imperialism, the German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg called attention to the stark contrast between the humanitarian pretensions of the imperialist powers in the face of natural disasters and their brutality in suppressing any opposition to their domination.

The disaster then was the eruption of Mt. Pelee on the island of Martinique, which killed some 40,000 people.

Citing the massacre of Africans by the British, Filipinos by the Americans, and colonial peoples in other lands by all the major powers, Luxemburg wrote:

“And now they have all turned to Martinique, all one heart and one mind again; they help, rescue, dry the tears and curse the havoc-wreaking volcano. Mt. Pelee, great-hearted giant, you can laugh; you can look down in loathing at these benevolent murderers, at these weeping carnivores, at these beasts in Samaritan’s clothing. But a day will come when another volcano lifts its voice of thunder: a volcano that is seething and boiling, whether you heed it or not, and will sweep the whole sanctimonious, blood-splattered culture from the face of the earth.”

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