

Haiti's elite eyes profits as millions face disease and hunger

By Bill Van Auken
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“A crisis is a terrible thing to waste,” Georges Sassine, president of Haiti’s manufacturers association, told the *Washington Post*.

“This is what the earthquake is today—an opportunity, a huge opportunity,” added Reginald Boulos, described by the *Post* Monday as the owner of a “small empire” of supermarkets, a hotel and a car dealership. “I think we need to give the message that we are open for business. This is really a land of opportunities.”

Meanwhile, “US firms have begun jockeying for a bonanza of cleanup work,” the *Miami Herald* reported last week, adding that “At least two politically connected US firms have enlisted powerful local allies in Haiti to help compete for the high-stakes business.”

One of them, AshBritt, won a \$900 million federal contract for clean-up in post-Katrina New Orleans, thanks in large part to its connections with powerful lobbyists, including Haley Barbour, the Mississippi governor and former Republican Party chairman.

Now these companies are sealing deals with Haitian businessmen and wooing the country’s politicians to win contracts that will no doubt soak up much of the international aid that has been offered to rebuild Haiti.

Even before the earthquake, Haiti was the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, as well as one of the most unequal, with 80 percent of the population living in poverty, 70 percent unemployed and fully half somehow surviving on \$1 or less a day.

Now, the catastrophe seems certain to widen the already immense gap between wealth and poverty that is the central characteristic of Haitian society.

Haiti’s wealthy ruling elite—together with US-based corporations—are salivating over the prospects for increased riches and big profits off of post-earthquake reconstruction as millions of working class and poor people are facing the threat of starvation and infectious

epidemics that could easily push an already horrendous death toll up by hundreds of thousands more.

Rain fell again on Port-au-Prince Sunday, creating even more hellish conditions for the more than half a million people crowded into the capital’s makeshift camps, most with little more than a sheet to shield them from the elements. Across the country, there are an estimated 1.5 million people who have been made homeless.

The most recent report from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) warns that hundreds of thousands of the homeless are at risk with the approach of the rainy season. Among them are the 25,000 encamped on a golf course in Petionville, the largest such settlement. The UN agency described the densely populated camp as “one of the most vulnerable sites for epidemics and flooding,” warning that “A large number of shelters are on unstable slopes and heavy rains will cause them to slide.”

Distribution of emergency shelter materials has been agonizingly slow. “As of 11 February, over 49,000 tarps have been distributed along with 23,000 family size tents,” OCHA reported. The Haitian government has insisted that its most urgent need is 200,000 tents—nearly 10 times the number distributed thus far.

Given these conditions, the prospect that many more will die is growing. The biggest cause of death in the camps now is acute respiratory infection, according to the report. Many who suffered traumatic injuries in the quake are recovering in the camps, where the lack of sanitation and shelter pose the danger that they will fall victim to deadly infections. There is the wider threat that malaria and dengue, which are normally widespread in Haiti during the rainy season, will become rampant along with other infectious illnesses,

under the miserable conditions to which millions have been condemned.

While aid agencies have established a more regularized system for food distribution, adequate supplies are still not reaching those affected. “The food security situation, which was already precarious prior to the earthquake, is getting worse,” said an OCHA spokeswoman.

There is growing frustration among the Haitians over the continued failure to deliver sufficient aid of any kind to the vast majority of the people. Within the past several days this has broken out into angry protests, aimed at Haitian government officials as well as foreign agencies and leaders, including former US President Bill Clinton, designated as the UN’s special envoy to the country.

Also frustrated are many of the relief workers, who continue to point to the failure to swiftly move large amounts of supplies that have piled up at the Port-au-Prince airport, which has been under the control of the US military since the day after the January 12 earthquake.

An article published in the *Miami Herald* Monday provided a graphic indication of this situation.

“A United Nations tally showed aid groups had distributed some 20,000 mats to Haiti earthquake survivors on a recent day—but more than 35 times as many sat in a warehouse,” the *Herald* reported.

“Some 32,000 tarps had been delivered by last Sunday, but 104,132 more sat in storage while tens of thousands of quake victims strung up sheets to create makeshift housing.”

Eric Klein, founder of the relief group CAN-DO, which is active in Haiti, told the *Herald*, “There’s no excuse for medical supplies sitting in a warehouse five minutes from a hospital where they are doing amputations and giving people ibuprofen for the pain.”

A correspondent for the Venezuelan television network teleSur reported that food being distributed from the airport is reaching the Haitian population already spoiled for being kept so long in the heat.

Doctors, relief workers and officials of a number of governments have blamed the militarization of the response to the earthquake by the US government for delaying aid, particularly in the crucial first two weeks after the disaster struck.

Some 22,000 US soldiers, sailors and Marines were

dispatched to the Caribbean nation, with combat-equipped troops taking control of the airport, port facilities and presidential palace. Meanwhile, naval warships and Coast Guard cutters set up a blockade of the country’s coast to block the earthquake’s victims from trying to flee to the US. Last week, the Coast Guard brought 78 Haitians intercepted on a boat in the waters off the Bahamas backed to their ravaged homeland.

General Douglas Fraser, chief of the US Southern Command, announced on Saturday that the Pentagon has scaled back the military presence to 13,000 troops. Many of those leaving are to be redeployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. The general refused to say how long the remaining force would stay in Haiti, stating only that they would be there as long as “necessary.”

The necessity driving this military occupation is that of defending the interests of Haiti’s wealthy ruling elite as well as those of US corporations seeking to profit off cheap labor and devastation against the threat that the crisis will trigger a social revolt by Haiti’s impoverished population.

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