

WikiLeaks exposes US profiteering after Haiti earthquake

By John Marion
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On June 15, the whistleblower web site WikiLeaks began releasing US diplomatic cables from the period immediately following the devastating Haitian earthquake of January 2010. The cables, from among the 251,287 in WikiLeaks' possession, provide important information on the machinations of US politicians, on their tight control over Haitian government functions, and about their drive to reopen Haiti to capitalist exploitation.

WikiLeaks has reached an agreement with *Haiti Liberté*, a weekly paper and web site published by Haitian immigrants in the US, under which the paper has first access to the Haitian cables and also helps to post them on the WikiLeaks web site. Concurrently, *The Nation* is publishing English-language translations of the *Haiti Liberté* articles.

Approximately 1,900 cables from the US embassy in Port-au-Prince will be released on WikiLeaks using this process. One hundred of them had been released as of June 22, including 36 about the earthquake, most written by then-Ambassador Kenneth Merten.

The most damning section of the earthquake cables appears at the end of one written on February 1, 2010, with a section titled "The Gold Rush is On!" The "veritable free-for-all" of profit-seekers included a sales presentation given to Haitian President Rene Preval by retired general and former US presidential candidate Wesley Clark on a model of cheap housing that would supposedly shelter the poor from future earthquakes and hurricanes.

AshBritt, Inc. was also anxious to get in on the "gold rush." A US corporation with close ties to the Republican party, Ashbritt had already been accused by Broward County, Florida, of double-billing it more than \$700,000 after Hurricane Wilma in 1999, and had earned a reputation for profiteering after Hurricane

Katrina.

In Haiti, AshBritt proposed a national plan to rebuild all government buildings, according to the February 1 cable. In this plan, it was aided by Gilbert Bigio, one of the few billionaires in Haiti, who joined with AshBritt to form the Haiti Recovery Group (HRG). Bigio made much of his fortune during the Duvalier regime, and in 2004 told the *Miami Herald*, "I don't think there's resentment against people who are rich here.... [I]f you know how to manage success, people admire you instead of hate you."

In turn, Ashbritt and the HRG were aided by Lewis Lucke, a career USAID bureaucrat appointed unified relief coordinator ambassador shortly after the earthquake. Within months of taking that position, Lucke left it in order to work as a consultant for AshBritt and the HRG. Not content with the \$30,000-per-month fee he received from them for two months of consulting, Lucke turned around and sued the companies for \$500,000, arguing that he deserved it for having used his government connections to grab \$20 million in contracts for the HRG.

Now on the board of the company MC Endeavors, Lucke recently called the inauguration of new Haitian president Michel Martelly "an optimistic time for all Haitians and its many international partners [sic]," according to the company's web site.

Like the looting of Wall Street, however, the depredations of capitalism in Haiti are not limited to the actions of individuals. The WikiLeaks cables make plain the concern of the US embassy that clothing manufacturers be able to continue profiting from cheap labor.

A February 26, 2010, cable boasts that for the apparel industry, "shipping from Haiti resumed in less than a month, meeting customers' expectations of having

their orders filled on time.” Another cable expresses the worry that Wal-Mart will “source” its needs elsewhere if Haiti doesn’t meet its infrastructure needs.

Under the guise of “helping” Haitian workers by providing jobs, the February 26 cable elaborates that “international investors, brands, and manufacturers who expressed interest in expanding production in Haiti before the earthquake renewed their commitment to support the Haitian apparel industry, taking advantage of the trade preferences of the HOPE II Act for duty-free export to the US.”

The embassy makes these boasts despite the story, also related in the February 26 cable, of a factory that completely collapsed during the earthquake, killing at least 300 workers.

Cables from June 2009, also released on WikiLeaks this month, detail attempts by the US embassy to advocate on behalf of Hanes and Levi’s against a minimum wage increase, according to *Haiti Liberte*. The minimum wage increase was being debated by parliament at a time when the average worker in Haiti’s garment sector made the equivalent of US\$4.33 per day.

The post-earthquake cables also show the extent of the US Government’s control over Haiti, down to the smallest details. A January 19 cable detailing a visit by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton describes repeated attempts by Clinton and her legal counsel to talk President Preval and Prime Minister Bellerive into setting up government-run refugee camps. The Haitian government was afraid that such camps might make “the security situation worse” or lead to protests against the government. A January 26 cable describes a detailed report given to the embassy officer about raw material inventories in the SANOPi industrial park.

One of three cables sent on January 29 states that “the Governor and Chief Internal Auditor of the Central Bank have both repeatedly reassured EmbOff that re-establishing payroll for civil servants remains a priority” while “Maxime Charles, President of the Haitian Bankers’ Association told EmbOffs on January 27 that the Central Bank, with the help of MINUSTAH, is supplying funds to bank branches in provinces.” In a February 23 cable, a prominent Haitian senator gives the embassy political officer a report about political maneuverings in parliament. Cable after cable expresses the US embassy’s obsessive worry about

whether the government of Haiti can afford to meet its police payroll.

Despite disagreements over specifics, the cables demonstrate that the US State Department saw Preval and Bellerive as the quickest means of enforcing the needs of international capital. In a section of a January 27 cable titled “Parliament Seeking Relevance,” Merten reports that Bellerive did not bother to show up for a Haitian Senate hearing on January 25, while on the same day the lower house passed a resolution but “the resolution had no legal effect and received little coverage in the press.”

A month later, Merten seems surprised that Parliament has “re-established itself quickly” and is “re-asserting its role as a watchdog.” However, he writes parliament off as “inefficient” and expresses the hope that “Preval could sideline Parliament after May 2010 and make limited concessions only as needed.”

Adding to the cynicism of the Obama administration and its State Department, on February 12, Nancy Pelosi (then speaker of the US House) led a delegation of five senators and seven representatives at a meeting with Preval, Bellerive, and their cabinet. All but one in the US delegation were Democrats, including Senator Tom Harkin and Representatives Charles Rangel and John Conyers.

Echoing the mantra of the US bourgeoisie that an earthquake that killed hundreds of thousands could serve as an “opportunity,” Pelosi answered Preval’s plea for US private investment by telling him, “we’re receptive...and we would like to hear that Haiti is going toward a different place. If so, you would receive even more support, and we see this as an opportunity to be even more helpful.” The “different place” envisioned by Pelosi can only mean more destitution for Haiti’s workers, regardless of which big business party controls the US government.

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