

UN hides its role in Haiti cholera outbreak

By John Marion
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Having caused Haiti's deadly cholera outbreak through the carelessness and arrogance of its MINUSTAH forces, the United Nations has again refused to take responsibility.

On February 23, UN spokesman Martin Nesirsky announced that no reparations will be paid to victims of the epidemic, which has killed more than 8,000 people since 2010 and is expected to continue killing at least 1,000 per year. Nesirsky's announcement was in response to claims filed in 2011 by the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti on behalf of 5,000 Haitians. *Alterpresse* has reported that the requested settlement was for several hundred million dollars

In stating that the claims are not "receivable," Nesirsky is hiding behind well-established bourgeois norms of diplomatic immunity. When MINUSTAH forces were sent to Haiti in 2004 after the overthrow of a democratically elected president, the country's interim government signed the same sort of "status of forces" agreement that has been forced on the governments of Afghanistan and Iraq by US imperialism. The MINUSTAH (the initials stand for the French name Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti) agreement included a UN promise to "cooperate with respect to sanitary services and...in matters concerning health, particularly in respect to the control of communicable diseases."

This empty promise stands in stark contrast to the UN's subsequent actions. In fact, a panel of experts appointed by UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon concluded unequivocally in its final report (<http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/haiti/UN-cholera-report-final.pdf>) that the disease was introduced into a tributary of the Artibonite River near the city of Mirebalais through an open sewage pit at a MINUSTAH camp. The camp housed Nepalese soldiers carrying the bacterium. Before that, cholera had been unknown in Haiti for more than a century.

The report's researchers conducted an epidemiological study of the progression of the disease down the river, compared its genetic makeup to that of strains active in Nepal at the time, and examined the sanitation facilities at the camp near Mirebalais. While noting other factors that have contributed to the epidemic—such as the lack of adequate medical facilities—the report states that "the evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion" that the Nepalese soldiers brought the disease. It includes a graphic photograph of the open sewage pit that was used by a private contractor employed by the UN.

Prior to its own report, the UN had sought to blame the epidemic on a strain of the disease occurring naturally in the ocean, advancing the absurd claim that it might have been forced into the mouth of the Artibonite by ocean currents resulting from the 2010 earthquake. According to journalist Jonathan Katz, the UN also destroyed evidence related to its initial reactions to the epidemic and waited a year and a half to respond to the IJDH's demands.

The *Atlantic* has reported on the legal origins of the UN's claims to immunity. Using the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, the UN is claiming that MINUSTAH is a matter of public policy and therefore not subject to civil procedures involving individuals. In addition, the 1945 International Organizations Immunity Act (IOIA) was passed by the US government as a means of luring the UN to New York. The *Atlantic* describes how case law since that time has made the IOIA a bulwark of property interests, while shielding governments and the UN from the consequences of their actions.

In Haiti, the UN's claims of diplomatic immunity are not just an evasion of responsibility. The imperialist powers have a definite interest in maintaining an armed force in the country in the face of popular disgust with President Michel Martelly. The UN does not consider

the fledgling Haitian National Police strong enough yet to protect capitalism's interests, and is worried that Martelly's attempts to reestablish the Haitian army would lead to political unrest (see "Haiti's President Martelly seeks to bring back military as internal police force"

<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/01/hait-j05.html>

The UN is therefore going to great expense to keep its "boots on the ground." For the year ending June 30, 2012, MINUSTAH had a budget of nearly US\$800 million. Jonathan Katz has reported that US funding for MINUSTAH since 2004 is in the range of US\$1.5 billion.

The summary of a March 8, 2012, UN Security Council meeting on Haiti, available on the MINUSTAH web site, complained that the Haitian National Police "now had some 10,000 officers, triple the number in 2004, but still not enough. Noting...the extreme inequalities and other development challenges that still existed in the country,...the main goal now was to ensure the consolidation of efforts to bring about stability and peace." By "stability" and "peace," the UN means the ability to make profits without public unrest.

An August 2012 report (<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42559.pdf>) by the Congressional Research Service detailed the social conditions underlying imperialism's worries about unrest: the poorest 20 percent of the population get less than 1.5 percent of the country's income, 78 percent of the population live on less than US\$2 per day, and "do not get the minimum daily ration of food defined by the World Health Organization." Garment manufacturers and other corporations see a cheap source of labor in such conditions, but also fear revolution. These worries have been exacerbated by protests against Martelly and corruption charges involving his wife and son.

The UN has other concerns about the Haitian National Police in addition to staffing levels, and is aware of its record of summary executions and torture. However, the UN does not see a reconstituted Haitian army as stable enough to protect capitalist interests, and therefore insists on keeping MINUSTAH in place despite its record of sexual abuses, importation of cholera to the island, and armed invasions of poor neighborhoods.

The debate over how best to subdue the population has been carried on since MINUSTAH's inception. A February 2004 US State Department cable released by Wikileaks stated that "while France has indicated a willingness to send military assistance to Haiti, the specter of French troops in Haiti at this time is a very sensitive issue, particularly as France is the former colonizer and Haiti is currently 'celebrating' the 200th anniversary of discarding that yoke. A joint dispatch under the UN banner would be more palatable."

At the beginning of 2012, then-foreign minister Laurent Lamothe told a reporter "that a national army is crucial in order to attract the foreign investment Haiti so desperately needs." In the March 2012 Security Council meeting, which included handwringing about the informal mobilization of former soldiers, then-US ambassador to the UN Susan Rice badgered the Haitian government "to push through reforms that would ease knotty regulation procedures and show the world that 'Haiti is truly open for business.'"

For now, the UN still sees MINUSTAH as the best option. As a public relations measure, it announced on February 28—five days after denying cholera victims' demands—a plan to eliminate cholera from Haiti. The plan is to be spread over 10 years—during which thousands more will die—and was launched with the token gesture of vaccinating approximately 100 people in the city of Cap Haitien.

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