

# Haiti: From Shackles to a Wrecked Land

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The country of Haiti was hit with an earthquake on a scale of seven on January 12, 2010.

However, being left in ruins is not only a by-product of a natural disaster, it lies within a history of imperialistic savagery and exploitation by the powerful – namely France and the US.

One can trace the beginnings to the independence of the country in 1802-1804, which came after a costly and brutal war.

The slave revolt led to the creation of a new state, a state which was only illusory in terms of actual sovereignty.

France did not leave without making sure the Haitians paid for their disobedience. “Nor could the infant US, a land of slave owners, cope with the idea of such a nation at its gates. There was only one solution: to forbid it to exist. The plan succeeded thanks to the cooperation of Haiti’s elite. They agreed in 1825 to pay France a gigantic sum to concede independence and indemnify themselves” (Wargny, Le Monde Diplomatique).

The Napoleonic invasion was merely a first step; Woodrow Wilson’s Marine intervention started from 1915 and lasted till 1934, an occupation that was filled with torture, oppression, and rampage in an impoverished country.

It was also the introduction of an economic design destined to prevent the country from developing. Carl Lindskoog explains the twentieth century progression: “From 1957-1971 Haitians lived under the dark shadow of ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier, a brutal dictator who enjoyed U.S. backing because he was seen by Americans as a reliable anti-Communist.

“After his death, Duvalier’s son, Jean-Claude ‘Baby Doc’ became president-for-life at the age of 19 and he ruled Haiti until he was finally overthrown in 1986. It was in the 1970s and 1980s that Baby Doc and the United States government and business community worked together to put Haiti and Haiti’s capital city on track to become what it was on January 12, 2010” (Lindskoog, Common Dreams).

Haiti has been called the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and one of the poorest countries in the world.

The people live off a meager two dollars a day with surrounding environmental conditions that are sordid, unbearable and inhuman and should bring people to the point of revulsion.

Interestingly enough, certain media outlets give viewers the impression that the present

circumstances come from improper building infrastructure and design, no birth control availability, and the lack of education.

Now, one can argue that these issues are relevant and need to be seriously discussed, which they should, but it distracts from looking at what caused some of these conditions to surface.

Professor and author Peter Hallward states, “Decades of neoliberal ‘adjustment’ and neo-imperial intervention have robbed its government of any significant capacity to invest in its people or to regulate its economy. Punitive international trade and financial arrangements ensure that such destitution and impotence will remain a structural fact of Haitian life for the foreseeable future.” (Hallward, The Guardian).

The neoliberal agenda that has been carried out since the 1970s and 1980s needs to be stressed. Its basis lies in no humanitarian need or concern, but instead on privatization, deregulation, and deadly investments that drive a population into plight.

These corporate influences in a country have no role for human sympathy, but only for maximizing their profits which are achieved by completely ignoring the demands of the population.

Hallward continues ... “[The] assault on Haiti’s agrarian economy has forced tens of thousands of small farmers into overcrowded urban slums. Although there are no reliable statistics, hundreds of thousands of Port-au-Prince residents now live in desperately sub-standard informal housing, often perched precariously on the side of deforested ravines.” (Hallward, The Guardian).

Therefore, attributing the death toll from the earthquake to just the factor of houses being built substandardly or that the overpopulated cities are slums is an understatement, and it omits important information.

Namely, what is the cause? A question not often heard. The cause is that the situation and awful conditions came from foreign occupation and foreign business intervention that simply did not care about the effects that they would wreak on the country.

The peasants had no choice but to migrate to the cities, where they were now supposed to take up manufacturing jobs and leave their agricultural backgrounds behind.

“However, when they got there they found there weren’t nearly enough manufacturing jobs to go around....Slum areas expanded. And to meet the housing needs of the displaced peasants, quickly and cheaply constructed housing was put up, sometimes placing houses right ‘on top of each other’” (Lindskoog, Common Dreams).

The IMF, World Bank, and others have been among the architects and abettors of the neoliberal program that has been in place.

“Thirty years ago, for example, Haiti was self-sufficient in its staple of rice. In the mid-90s the IMF forced it to slash tariffs, the US dumped its subsidised surplus on the country, and Haiti now imports the bulk of its rice. Tens of thousands of rice farmers were forced to move to the jerry-built slums of Port-

au-Prince. Many died as a result last week” (Milne, The Guardian).

These destructive consequences may look like a game for those in Washington – those who never experience the consequences of what they create – but to any sensible human being it is sufficient to drive one to the point of rage and anger.

President Obama’s military response is another example of wilfully ignoring the past.

“By sending 4,600 ground troops and 10,000 more on support vessels, the US deployed a better-equipped but equal force to that of Minustah (UN Stabilisation Mission in Haiti). US involvement has been welcomed by all sides... putting in place the huge logistical machine that only the US has at its disposal. This is the third such military intervention in 16 years. The previous ones resolved nothing.” (Wargny, Le Monde Diplomatique).

Can a military intervention achieve success? Is it necessary to block “medical equipment and emergency supplies from organizations such as the World Food Programme” and to prioritize troop entrance over a people in dire need of aid? It also begs the question of what any military occupation should do, what motive does the deployment present?

The US has a long history with this small former colonial country.

In the year 1990, Catholic priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide was the first democratically elected President in Haiti.

The other candidate, Marc Bazin, was easily beaten in a contest that overwhelmingly favored the non-US backed candidate Aristide.

The US did not allow a democratically elected President to stay in office since socialistic tendencies need to be discouraged at all times.

What right does this small country have to decide which individual should represent them? The US supported a coup that overthrew Aristide in 1991, and again in 2004.

Aristide’s coming into office was actually a great example of a democratic and social movement, one which came from a popular grassroots organization, known as the Lavalas (The Flood), and is inspiring to those concerned with actual democracy.

But the present state of affairs, which some portray as altruistic, should be viewed as questionable.

If anything “another motivation has become clearer as the US has launched a full-scale naval blockade of Haiti to prevent a seaborne exodus by refugees seeking sanctuary in the United States from the desperate aftermath of disaster. So while Welsh firefighters and Cuban doctors have been getting on with the job of saving lives this week, the 82nd Airborne Division was busy parachuting into the ruins of Haiti’s presidential palace.” (Milne, The Guardian)

This is a good lesson to highlight. No matter what the powerful do to the weak, the consequences should never be evaluated. Why is this case? The reason is straightforward: We never reflect on our crimes because our crimes do not exist. All our intentions are noble

and righteous.

Al Jazeera reports that the Haiti's government "has raised the death toll from the January 12 earthquake that destroyed much of its capital, to at least 230,000."

The after effects are going to get even worse. With improper sanitation and diseases escalating rapidly, this atrocious event will leave a scar very deep within Haitian society. If the proper medical equipment is not made rapidly and comprehensively available, the death toll is sure to keep increasing.

Onome Akpogheneta from the Faster Times informs, "Haiti has the highest childhood mortality rates (80 deaths per 1,000 children under 5 years) and lowest life expectancy (61 years) in the Americas. Current elevated disease risks also reflect the low rates of vaccination (51% in 2006 for children in the first year of life). A vaccination program began on 2nd February to provide measles/rubella and diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis vaccinations to children under 7 years, and diphtheria and tetanus vaccines for all over 8 years. (Akpogheneta, The Faster Times).

Nonetheless, Haiti still has another problem waiting – rain. "With the rains will come increased risk of mosquito borne diseases malaria and dengue, and water borne diseases including typhoid and cholera. The rainy season will be succeeded by the hurricane season, which will bring new challenges for Haiti." (Akpogheneta, The Faster Times).

All of these issues pose tremendous challenges that need to be taken seriously, and it would not be fair to ignore the heroic efforts of various NGOs that are doing that and more.

Dr. Paul Farmer of Harvard Medical, and co-founder of Partners in Health (PIH), has been working in Haiti and other third world countries for the past twenty years. Farmer's work and contributions for humanity should stand as a great example of hope and courage.

PIH is an organization that responded to the call from and addressed the needs of Haiti and helped many. "The nonprofit employs about 4,000 people in Haiti, more than half of them community health workers who have built a network of services reaching villages across the Central Plateau. When the quake hit, Partners in Health became the go-to international group for coordinating the emergency medical response." (Smith, Boston Globe).

The only question left to ask is, what can we do? Haiti has sustained a lot. It has been destroyed, pillaged, and left in ruins, but it is not hopeless.

Hallward states in his article that this crisis should be a time of long reflection. It means looking in the mirror and seeing what we have caused.

"The international community has been effectively ruling Haiti since the 2004 coup. The same countries scrambling to send emergency help to Haiti now, however, have during the last five years consistently voted against any extension of the UN mission's mandate beyond its immediate military purpose." (Hallward, The Guardian).

Another point to observe is the contrast that is evident when comparing Haiti with another country in its geographical vicinity. The contrast is striking with "Haiti which has taken its market medicine, with nearby Cuba, which hasn't, but suffers from a 50-year US economic

blockade. While Haiti's infant mortality rate is around 80 per 1,000, Cuba's is 5.8; while nearly half Haitian adults are illiterate; the figure in Cuba is around 3%. And while 800 Haitians died in the hurricanes that devastated both islands last year, Cuba lost four people." (Milne, The Guardian).

It provides one with a startling distinction. The US has been involved in Haiti's demise for a long time now, and if Washington follows the same foreign policy it will only bring it down further.

The New York Times described a conversation between President Obama and former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, in which the former presidents "each asked the same simple question: 'How can I help?'" (Smith, The New York Times).

The irony lies in the fact that it was these two former presidents who supported coups to bring down a democratically elected government in Haiti; these two same presidents were part of the downfall of the country and instituting a vicious reign of terror. But democratic elections are not tolerated in Washington, and must be eliminated at once. If we really are serious about changing the fate of Haiti, it must start here. The choice is ours, the choice is yours.

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