

# HAITI: Private Contractors 'Like Vultures Coming to Grab the Loot'

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In-depth Report: [HAITI](#)

VANCOUVER, Canada – Critics are concerned that private military contractors are positioning themselves at the centre of an emerging “shock doctrine” for earthquake-ravaged Haiti.

Next month, a prominent umbrella organisation for private military and logistic corporations, the International Peace Operations Association (IPOA), is co-organising a “Haiti summit” which aims to bring together “leading officials” for “private consultations with attending contractors and investors” in Miami, Florida.

Dubbed the “mercenary trade association” by journalist Jeremy Scahill, author of “Blackwater: the Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army”, the IPOA wasted no time setting up a “Haiti Earthquake Support” page on its website following the Jan. 12 earthquake that devastated the Caribbean country.

IPOA’s director Doug Brooks says, “The first contacts we got were journalists looking for security when they went in.” The website of IPOA member company, Hart Security, says they are currently in Haiti “supporting clients from the fields of media, consultancy and medical in their disaster recovery efforts.” Several other IPOA members have either bid on or received contracts for work in Haiti.

Likewise, the private military contractor, Raidon Tactics, has at least 30 former U.S. Special Operations soldiers on the ground, where they have been guarding aid convoys and providing security for “news agencies,” according to a Raidon employee who told IPS his company received over 1,000 phone calls in response to an ad posting “for open positions for Static Security Positions and Mobile Security Positions” in Haiti.

Just over a week following the earthquake, the IPOA teamed up with Global Investment Summits (GIS), a UK-based private company that specialises in bringing private contractors and government officials from “emerging post-conflict countries” together, to host an “Afghanistan Reconstruction Summit”, in Istanbul, Turkey. It was there, says IPOA’s director Doug Brooks, that the idea for the Haiti summit was hatched “over beers”.

GIS’s CEO, Kevin Lumb, told IPS that the key feature of the Haiti summit will be “what we call roundtables, [where] we put the ministers and their procurement people, and arrange appointments with contractors.” Lumb added that his company “specialise[s] in putting governments together [with private contractors].”

IPOA was “so pleased” with the Afghanistan summit, says Lumb, they asked GIS to do “all the organising, all the selling” for the Haiti summit. Lumb pointed out that all of the profits

from the event will be donated to the Clinton-Bush Haiti relief fund.

While acknowledging that there will be a “a commercial angle” to the event and that “major companies, major players in the world” have committed to attend, Lumb declined to name most of the participants.

One of the companies Lumb did mention is DACC Associates, a private contractor that specialises in management and security consulting with contracts providing “advice and counsel” to governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

DACC President Douglas Melvin, a former Special Forces commander, State Department official and director of Security and Administrative Services for President George W. Bush, acknowledged that “from a revenue perspective, yes there’s wonderful opportunities at these events.”

Melvin added that he believes most attendees will be “coming together for the right reasons,” a genuine concern for Haiti, are “not coming to exploit” the dire situation there, and does not expect his company to profit off of their potential contracts there.

Naomi Klein, author of “The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism”, is concerned that the thesis of her best-selling book will once again be tested in Haiti. She told IPS in an e-mail, “Haiti doesn’t need cookie cutter one-size fits all reconstruction, designed by the same gang that made same such a hash of Iraq, Afghanistan and New Orleans – and indeed the same people responsible for the decimation of Haiti’s own economy in the name of ‘aid.’”

Unhappy with critics’ characterisation of the IPOA, Brooks said, “If Scahill and Klein have the resources, the capabilities, the equipment, to go in and do it themselves then more power to them.”

University of California at Los Angeles professor Nandini Gunewardena, co-editor of “Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction,” told IPS that “privatisation is not the way to go for disaster assistance.”

“Traditionally, corporations have positioned themselves in a way that they benefit at the expense of the people. We cannot afford for that to happen in Haiti,” she said, adding that “any kind of intermediate or long-term assistance strategy has to be framed within that framework of human security.”

This, according to the U.N.-based Commission on Human Security, means “creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity.”

Denouncing the “standard recipe of neoliberal policies,” Gunewardena said, “If private corporations are going to contribute to Haiti’s restoration, they have to be held accountable, not to their own standards, but to those of the people.”

Reached by telephone, Haiti’s former Minister of Defence under the first presidency of Jean Bertrand Aristide, Patrick Elie, agreed. He’s worried about the potential privatisation of his country’s rebuilding, “because these private companies [aren’t] liable, you can’t take them to the United Nations, you can’t take them to The Hague, and they operate in kind of legal

limbo. And they are the more dangerous for it.”

Elie, who accepted a position as advisor to President Rene Preval following the earthquake, added “These guys are like vultures coming to grab the loot over this disaster, and probably money that might have been injected into the Haitian economy is going to be just grabbed by these companies and I’m sure that they are not only these mercenary companies but also the other companies like Halliburton or these other ones that always [come] on the heels of the troops.”

In its 2008 report, “Private Security Contractors at War: Ending the Culture of Impunity,” the NGO Human Rights First decried the “failure of the U.S. government to effectively control their actions, and in particular the inability or unwillingness of the Department of Justice (DoJ) to hold them criminally responsible for their illegal actions.”

The IPOA’s Brooks told IPS that members of the Haitian diaspora and Haiti’s embassy have been invited and are “going to be a big part” of the summit.

While stressing that it’s impossible to know the exact details of an event that is planned outside of public scrutiny, Elie countered that if high-level Haitian officials were to participate, “It’s either out of ignorance or complicity.”

Worried that Haiti is already seeing armed contractors in addition to the presence of more than 20,000 U.S., Canadian, and U.N. soldiers, Elie says he has seen private contractors accompanying NGOs, “walking about carrying assault rifles.”

If the U.S. military pulls out and hands over the armed presence to private contractors, “It opens the door to all kinds of abuses. Let’s face it, the Haitian state is too weak to really deal efficiently with this kind of threat if it materialises,” he said.

The history of post-disaster political economy has shown that such a threat is all too likely, says Elie. “We’ve seen it happen so many times before that whenever there is a disaster, there are a bunch of vultures trying to profit from it, whether it’s a man-made disaster like Iraq, or a nature-made disaster like Haiti.”

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