

Profiting From Haiti's Crisis

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Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

In-depth Report: [HAITI](#)

US corporations, private mercenaries, Washington and the International Monetary Fund are using the crisis in Haiti to make a profit, promote unpopular neoliberal policies, and extend military and economic control over the Haitian people.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, with much of the infrastructure and government services destroyed, Haitians have relied on each other for the relief efforts, working together to pull their neighbors, friends and loved ones from the rubble. One report from [IPS News](#) in Haiti explained, "In the day following the quake, there was no widespread violence. Guns, knives and theft weren't seen on the streets, lined only with family after family carrying their belongings. They voiced their anger and frustration with sad songs that echoed throughout the night, not their fists."

Bob Moliere, an organizer within the popular political party Fanmi Lavalas was killed in the earthquake. His wife, Marianne Moliere, told [IPS News](#) after burying her husband, "There is no life for me because Bob was everything to me. I lost everything. Everything is destroyed," she said. "I'm sleeping in the street now because I'm homeless. But when I get some water, I share with others. Or if someone gives some spaghetti, I share with my family and others."

It is not this type of solidarity that has emerged in the wake of the crisis – and the [delayed and muddled](#) response from the international community – that most corporate media in the US have focused on. Instead, echoing the coverage and calls for militarization of New Orleans in the wake of Katrina, major media outlets talk about the looting, and need for security to protect private property.

One request from Erwin Berthold, the owner of Big Star Market in Petionville, Haiti, reflects this concern for profit over people. Berthold told the [Washington Post](#) about his supermarket, "We have everything cleaned up inside. We are ready to open. We just need some security. So send in the Marines, okay?"

That militarization is already underway. This week the US is sending thousands of troops and soldiers to the country. The Haitian government has signed over control of its capital airport to the US. Brazil and France have already [lodged complaints](#) that US military planes are now being given priority over other flights at the international airport.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez [responded to the US troop deployment](#). "I read that 3,000 soldiers are arriving, Marines armed as if they were going to war. There is not a shortage of guns there, my God. Doctors, medicine, fuel, field hospitals, that's what the United States should send," Chavez said. "They are occupying Haiti undercover." The Venezuelan President pledged to send any necessary amount of gasoline needed to the

country to aid with electricity and transport.

A Heroic History in Washington's Backyard

There is also little mention in the major news outlets' coverage of how the US government and corporations helped impoverish Haiti in the first place, creating the economic poverty that makes disasters like this so extensive. Nor is there mention of the country's heroic struggle against imperialism and slavery. Fidel Castro pointed out in a [recent column](#), "Haiti was the first country in which 400,000 Africans, enslaved and trafficked by Europeans, rose up against 30,000 white slave masters on the sugar and coffee plantations, thus undertaking the first great social revolution in our hemisphere. ... Napoleon's most eminent general was defeated there. Haiti is the net product of colonialism and imperialism, of more than one century of the employment of its human resources in the toughest forms of work, of military interventions and the extraction of its natural resources."

University professor Peter Hallward, writing in the [Guardian Unlimited](#), criticized Washington for its responsibility in creating the suffering it is now pledging to alleviate in Haiti. "Ever since the US invaded and occupied the country in 1915, every serious political attempt to allow Haiti's people to move (in former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide's phrase) 'from absolute misery to a dignified poverty' has been violently and deliberately blocked by the US government and some of its allies. Aristide's own government (elected by some 75% of the electorate) was the latest victim of such interference, when it was overthrown by an internationally sponsored coup in 2004 that killed several thousand people and left much of the population smoldering in resentment. The UN has subsequently maintained a large and enormously expensive stabilization and pacification force in the country."

Brian Concannon, the director of the [Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti](#) told Hallward of the root causes for the overpopulation of neighborhoods in the city of Port-au-Prince that were hit so hard by the earthquake. "Those people got there because they or their parents were intentionally pushed out of the countryside by aid and trade policies specifically designed to create a large captive and therefore exploitable labor force in the cities; by definition they are people who would not be able to afford to build earthquake resistant houses." Unnatural crises such as this made the earthquake much more devastating.

Disaster Capitalism Comes to Haiti

As Naomi Klein thoroughly proved in her book [The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism](#), throughout history, "while people were reeling from natural disasters, wars and economic upheavals, savvy politicians and industry leaders nefariously implemented policies that would never have passed during less muddled times." This push to apply unpopular neoliberal policies began almost immediately after the earthquake in Haiti.

In a talk recorded by [Democracy Now!](#), Klein explained that the disaster in Haiti is created on the one hand by nature, and on the other hand "is worsened by the poverty that our governments have been so complicit in deepening. Crises—natural disasters are so much worse in countries like Haiti, because you have soil erosion because the poverty means people are building in very, very precarious ways, so houses just slide down because they are built in places where they shouldn't be built. All of this is interconnected. But we have to be absolutely clear that this tragedy, which is part natural, part unnatural, must, under no

circumstances, be used to, one, further indebt Haiti, and, two, to push through unpopular corporatist policies in the interests of our corporations.”

Following the disaster in Haiti, Klein [pointed out](#) that the Heritage Foundation, “one of the leading advocates of exploiting disasters to push through their [unpopular pro-corporate policies](#),” issued a statement on [its website](#) after the earthquake hit: “In addition to providing immediate humanitarian assistance, the U.S. response to the tragic earthquake in Haiti earthquake offers opportunities to re-shape Haiti’s long-dysfunctional government and economy as well as to improve the public image of the United States in the region.”

The mercenary trade group International Peace Operations Association (IPOA) immediately offered their services to provide “security” in Haiti to its member companies, according to [Jeremy Scahill](#). Within hours of the earthquake, Scahill wrote, the [IPOA website](#) announced, “In the wake of the tragic events in Haiti, a number of IPOA’s member companies are available and prepared to provide a wide variety of critical relief services to the earthquake’s victims.”

Kathy Robison, a Fortune 500 executive, formerly with Goldman Sachs Companies, [wrote of the](#) earthquake disaster in Haiti. “The business leaders I have been meeting with have seen enough disappointment and suffering,” she wrote. “What Haiti needs is economic development and the building of a true middle class. ... There is much we are planning as far as creating new and innovative ways of using international aid and government support to promote private investment.”

On January 14, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced a \$100 million loan to Haiti to help with relief efforts. However, Richard Kim at [The Nation](#) wrote that this loan was added onto \$165 million in debt made up of loans with conditions “including raising prices for electricity, refusing pay increases to all public employees except those making minimum wage and keeping inflation low.” This new \$100 million loan has the same conditions. Kim writes, “in the face of this latest tragedy, the IMF is still using crisis and debt as leverage to compel neoliberal reforms.”

The last thing Haiti needs at this point is more debt; what it needs is grants. As Kim wrote, according to a report from the [The Center for International Policy](#), in 2003 “Haiti spent \$57.4 million to service its debt, while total foreign assistance for education, health care and other services was a mere \$39.21 million.”

In the midst of the suffering and anguish following the earthquake, many Haitians came together to console and help each other. Journalist David Wilson, in Haiti during the time of the earthquake, [wrote of the singing](#) that followed the disaster. “Several hundred people had gathered to sing, clap, and pray in an intersection here by 9 o’clock last night, a little more than four hours after an earthquake had devastated much of the Haitian capital.” A young Haitian American commented to Wilson on the singing, “Haitians are different,” he said. “People in other countries wouldn’t do this. It’s a sense of community.”

If these elements of the “relief” efforts continue in this exploitative vein, it is this community that will likely be crushed even further by disaster capitalism and imperialism.

While international leaders and institutions are speaking about how many soldiers and dollars they are committing to Haiti, it is important to note that what Haiti needs is doctors not soldiers, grants not loans, a stronger public sector rather than a wholesale privatization,

and critical solidarity with grassroots organizations and people to support the self-determination of the country.

“We don’t need soldiers,” Patrick Elie, the former Defense Minister under the Aristide government told [Al Jazeera](#). “There is no war here.” In addition to critiquing the presence of the soldiers, he commented on the US-control of the main airport. “The choice of what lands and what doesn’t land, the priorities of the flight[s], should be determined by the Haitians. Otherwise, it’s a takeover and what might happen is that the needs of Haitians are not taken into account, but only either the way a foreign country defines the need of Haiti, or try to push its own agenda.”

For more information and suggestions on acting in solidarity with the Haitian people, [read this article](#).

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