

The Haiti Disaster Response: Is Another Katrina Relief Effort in the Making

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Every disaster plan is built to some degree around the idea of triage—deciding who can and cannot be saved. The worst cases are often separated and allowed to perish so that others who are considered more survivable can be treated.

There is a tragic triage underway in Haiti thanks to screw-ups on the part of the US and western response, and in part because of the objectively tough conditions in Haiti that blocked access and made the delivery of food, water and services difficult. But the planners should have known that!

Look at the TV coverage. “Saving Haiti” is the title CNN has given to its coverage. It shows us all the planes landing, and donations coming in and celebrity response on one hand, and then the problems/failures to actually deliver aid on the other.

Much of the coverage focuses on the upbeat—people being saved, although despite the frame which is about a compassionate America’s response, the Haitian reality is only barely getting through. It’s not pretty.

Everyone wants to believe in the best intentions of all involved but five days after the quake, with so few being helped, we have to ask, how did this get so badly done?

It’s like Obama’s plan to stop foreclosures through modifying loans. Great idea, but only a handful of homeowners have benefited. There is often a yawning gap between the idea and its execution.

So what happened? The short answer: it is too little and, in many cases, much of it, too late. A natural disaster has been compounded by another well-intentioned man-made one

Why? One global report I saw—sorry forget the publication, explained:

“United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon emphasized the importance of the first 72 hours following the 12 January disaster. But already much of that crucial time has been spent attempting to assess the situation.

The structures usually responsible for dealing with civilian emergencies have been unable to respond effectively due to widespread destruction of national and international power structures. (This means the UN and the Haitian government as well as the US effort, DS)

Lacking outside support, civilians have worked communally to try to save their own families.”

Supplies were sent but much of it has yet to get out of the airport. Troops have not been assigned to help deliver water or guard medical facilities. There is a fear of the wrath of a people that are pissed off at hearing about aid and money donated and, then, seeing nothing trickling down into their neighborhoods. Hence all the suggestions of violence as if it is all irrational.

And there is a deeper fear, a political fear. What with President Aristide, the man the US considers too radical for its tastes, anxious to return. There is a fear of a possible revolt against the lack of help could turn political and angry.

Hillary Clinton keeps telling the Haitians that we are their friend—but many doubt it

They know that Aristide's Lavalas party is the most popular in Haiti and wants a more profound transformation that the US wants to allow. It had been banned from taking part in scheduled elections next month that are likely to be cancelled. Haiti's president Preval is weak and dependent on the US largesse.

They also know that in the aftermath of other earthquakes like the one that rocked Managua, Nicaragua in the 1970's, a revolution followed. They don't want that to happen in Haiti, and know how volatile the country is in part because of neglect by the West over the years.

Private help is not getting through either. Western Union offices are still closed in a country that relies on foreign remittances as a lifeline.

The media is finally admitting the aid mission is failing although that's not the word used—they say the relief effort is "troubled!" Here's the headline in the NY Times: "Officials Strain to Distribute Aid to Haiti as Violence Rises

"A sprawling assembly of international officials and aid workers struggled to fix a troubled relief effort."

The Guardian/Observer focuses on a water delivery crisis. The article doesn't ask why armed troops were not assigned to protecting drivers.

"Hundreds of thousands of Haitians are in desperate need of drinking water because of an earthquake-damaged municipal pipeline and truck drivers either unable or unwilling to deliver their cargo.

"Many drivers are afraid of being attacked if they go out, some drivers are still missing in the disaster and others are out there searching for missing relatives," said Dudu Jean, a 30-year-old driver who was attacked on Friday when he drove into the capital's sprawling Cite Soleil slum.

The lack of water has become one of the greatest dangers facing Haitians in part because earthquake survivors stay outdoors all day in the heat out of fear of aftershocks and unstable buildings."

But there is something else going on.

The disaster planners have an agenda that goes beyond just saving lives. They want to use

the crisis to rebuild Haiti along lines they support. (ie. Support of property rights etc) So far they have not spoken about how policies backed by the United States through the Caribbean Basin Initiative was responsible for uprooting peasants from the countryside to move them to the city to be a cheap labor reserve. In that Reagan era effort, pigs were killed and imported food replaced home grown varieties to benefit US suppliers. Debt dependence grew—classic imperialist policies.

Read this report in coded uncritical top-down language from the Washington Post: “Even as rescuers are digging victims out of the rubble in Haiti, policymakers in Washington and around the world are grappling with how a destitute, corrupt and now devastated country might be transformed into a self-sustaining nation.

Development efforts have failed there, decade after decade, leaving Haitians with a dysfunctional government, a high crime rate and incomes averaging a dollar a day. But the leveled capital, Port-au-Prince, must be rebuilt, promising one of the largest economic development efforts ever undertaken in the hemisphere — an effort “measured in months and even years,” President Obama said Saturday in an appeal for donations alongside former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. And those who will help oversee it are thinking hard about how to use that money and attention to change the country forever.

“It’s terrible to look at it this way, but out of crisis often comes real change,” said C. Ross Anthony, the Rand Corp.’s global health director. “The people and the institutions take on the crisis and bring forth things they weren’t able to do in the past.”

The Rand Corporation is a military contractor primarily, a center for spooks and covert strategies. The fact that they are being quoted as saviors is scary in itself. In other words, Haiti’s future is being planned outside of Haiti and will be imposed step by step.

I don’t know about you but anything that George W Bush is supporting, I tend to be skeptical of, to say the least.

Let’s admit it, this disaster response is itself a disaster and helping to promote a new disaster to come.

Greg Palast points to some of the many contradictions that the TV networks that are milking Haiti’s pain in orgy of self-congratulatory reporting have yet to explore:

“China deployed rescuers with sniffer dogs within 48 hours. China, Mr. President. China: 8,000 miles distant. Miami: 700 miles close. US bases in Puerto Rico: right there. (Greg, make that 25,000 miles away!)

- Obama’s Defense Secretary Robert Gates said, “I don’t know how this government could have responded faster or more comprehensively than it has.” We know Gates doesn’t know.
- From my own work in the field, I know that FEMA has access to ready-to-go potable water, generators, mobile medical equipment and more for hurricane relief on the Gulf Coast. It’s all still there. Army Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré, who served as the task force commander for emergency response after Hurricane Katrina, told the Christian Science Monitor, “I thought we had learned that from Katrina, take food and water and start evacuating people.” Maybe we learned but, apparently, Gates and the Defense Department missed school that day.
- Send in the Marines. That’s America’s response. That’s what we’re good at. The aircraft

carrier USS Carl Vinson finally showed up after three days. With what? It was dramatically deployed — without any emergency relief supplies. It has sidewinder missiles and 19 helicopters.

- But don't worry, the International Search and Rescue Team, fully equipped and self-sufficient for up to seven days in the field, deployed immediately with ten metric tons of tools and equipment, three tons of water, tents, advanced communication equipment and water purifying capability. They're from Iceland.

(Hillary Clinton said proudly on Saturday that there are now 30 teams in place. No one asked, why only 30?)

- Gates wouldn't send in food and water because, he said, there was no "structure ... to provide security." For Gates, appointed by Bush and allowed to hang around by Obama, it's security first. That was his lesson from Hurricane Katrina. Blackwater before drinking water.

- Previous US presidents have acted far more swiftly in getting troops on the ground on that island. Haiti is the right half of the island of Hispaniola. It's treated like the right testicle of Hell. The Dominican Republic the left. In 1965, when Dominicans demanded the return of Juan Bosch, their elected President, deposed by a junta, Lyndon Johnson reacted to this crisis rapidly, landing 45,000 US Marines on the beaches to prevent the return of the elected president. "

And Greg asks the question that our media heroes have yet to explore. (And some are heroes. Bob Bozell on NBC was very candid on Saturday night about how little was being done on MSNBC!)

"How did Haiti end up so economically weakened, with infrastructure, from hospitals to water systems, busted or non-existent – there are two fire stations in the entire nation – and infrastructure so frail that the nation was simply waiting for "nature" to finish it off? "

Good question. One of the many we should be asking. In the meantime, we need the press to start asking tougher questions and exposing a Katrina-like response that is still losing countless lives .

A country in pain deserves relief. Not more pain.

If you lived there, wouldn't you be pissed and ready to explode?.

Your comments welcome, along with any experiences from people there.

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