

Beyond the Earthquake: A Wake-Up Call for Haiti

By Alex Dupuy

Long before the magnitude-7.0 earthquake (and several aftershocks) struck Haiti on January 12 and leveled the metropolitan capital city of Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas, that city was already a disaster in the making. In 1950, Port-au-Prince had a population of 150,000. It had reached 732,000 by 1982 and between 2 and 3 million by 2008 (Maguire, 2009). The problem, however, is that the city's infrastructure did not expand commensurably with this phenomenal growth in population. Quite the contrary, the city and national governments abandoned the city to itself. They provided no meaningful services of any kind (schools, health care, electricity, potable water, sanitation, zoning and construction regulations), and what they did provide was poorly administered or primarily served the needs of the wealthier districts.¹ Consider, for example, that only about 28 percent of Haitians have access to health care, 54 percent to potable water, 30 percent to sanitation. In short, the Haitian state long ago abdicated its responsibility to the majority of Haitian citizens, both urban and rural, and at least since the Duvalier era has deferred to bilateral and multilateral aid donors and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to provide services to the population. Whereas the former took charge of devising economic policy for Haiti, the latter provided needed services to the population. More NGOs per capita operate in Haiti than in any other country in the world, and they provide 70 percent of health care in rural areas and 80 percent of public services (Buss with Gardner, 2008: 10–13; FAO, 2008). This, in turn, has reinforced the state's *laissez aller* practices and led to the near total privatization of basic services. Except for a brief seven-month attempt in 1991 that ended in a bloody coup d'état against the democratically elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the turn to democratic governance has not changed that basic reality. The most recent estimate puts the death toll at 200,000 and some 300,000 injured. More than 250,000 homes have been destroyed along with some 35,000 commercial, industrial, and administrative buildings (*Le Monde*, February 4, 2010). Although the earthquake affected people in all social classes, the wealthier suburb of Pétiion-Ville above Port-au-Prince suffered significantly fewer casualties than the more densely populated and poorer neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince. The wealthier are also more likely to survive their injuries than the poor because of their overall better health and living conditions and because they have greater resources at their disposal (Sacchetti, 2010). In short, the high rate of casualties, especially among the poor, is a direct consequence of the generally poor infrastructure, inferior housing construction, and the long-standing disregard of the state for their welfare and their basic rights.

What is more, Haitian geologists had warned the government of the probability of an earthquake for years, but, as with previous massive destruction and loss of lives caused by hurricanes and tropical storms, the government took no measures to prepare for that possibility (Péan, 2010; Höges, 2010). It comes as no surprise, then, that the Haitian people have to rely entirely on the international community to come to its rescue. This would have been the case even if the symbols of government authority, the National Palace, the Parliament, the headquarters of the National Police, and other ministries, had not been destroyed for the simple reason that the capacity of the Haitian state to respond to a crisis of this magnitude (or even to less severe ones) is nonexistent primarily because of shortsighted practices and policies—political, economic, and social—that prioritize the interests of the few. Along with Bolivia, Haiti has the highest income inequality in the hemisphere. The richest 10 percent of the population control 47 percent of national income, and 2 percent hold 26 percent of the nation's wealth. By contrast, the poorest 20 percent receive 1.1 percent of national income; 76 percent of the population live on less than

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US\$2/day, and more than half live on less than US\$1/day (IADB, 2007; IMF, 2009; CIA, n.d.; FAO, 2008).

There is no doubt that the dominant economic and political classes of Haiti bear great responsibility for the abysmal conditions in the country that exacerbated the impact of the earthquake (or, before that, of hurricanes or tropical storms). However, these local actors did not create these conditions alone but did so in close partnership with foreign governments and economic actors with long-standing interests in Haiti, principally those of the advanced countries (the United States, Canada, and France) and their international financial institutions (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Inter-American Development Bank). Henceforth I will refer to this combination as “the U.S.-led bloc,” despite occasional friction among them, especially between the United States and France. In the 1970s, in return for military and economic aid from the United States and other countries, the regime of Jean-Claude Duvalier turned over the formulation of economic policy for Haiti to the international financial institutions. These institutions pursued a twofold strategy that succeeded in transforming Haiti into a supplier of the cheapest labor in this hemisphere for foreign and domestic investors in the export assembly industry and one of the largest importers of U.S. food in the hemisphere. These outcomes were achieved through a series of “structural adjustment” policies that maintained wages low, dismantled all obstacles to free trade, removed tariffs and quantitative restrictions on imports, offered tax incentives to the manufacturing industries on their profits and exports, privatized public enterprises, reduced public-sector employment, and curbed social spending to reduce fiscal deficits.

These policies had drastic consequences for the Haitian economy. Locating the assembly industries primarily in Port-au-Prince encouraged migration from the rural areas to the capital city, contributed to its bloated population and sprawling squalor, and provided a never-ending supply of cheap labor for those industries, which never employed more than 8 percent of the urban labor force. Those who could not find employment in the assembly industries swelled the ranks of the informal sector, thereby shrinking wages in that sector, which has become the largest source of employment for the urban population. At the same time, reducing tariffs and quantitative restrictions on food imports since the 1980s was detrimental to agriculture. Whereas in the 1970s Haiti imported only 10 percent of its food needs, currently it is spending 80 percent of its export revenues to pay for its food imports, with rice leading the list. Haiti went from being self-sufficient in the production of rice, sugar, poultry, and pork to become the fourth-largest importer of subsidized U.S. rice in the world and the largest importer of foodstuffs from the United States in the Caribbean. Trade liberalization, then, essentially meant transferring wealth from Haitian to U.S. farmers and the few firms in Haiti that controlled food imports. These policies, too, propelled rural-to-urban migration as farmers became dispossessed and headed for Port-au-Prince or emigrated to the neighboring Dominican Republic, the Caribbean, and North America. As the economy continued to decline, Haiti became increasingly dependent on remittances from its emigrants, which in 2008 represented 19 percent of Haiti’s gross domestic product. Accounting for 225 percent of Haiti’s export earnings, remittances helped offset Haiti’s chronic trade deficit (McGuigan, 2006; Dupuy, 2005; CIA, n.d.; World Bank, 2009; IMF, 2009; 2010).

The response of the international community has been immediate and massive. Thirty-nine countries have either pledged money or sent emergency aid of one sort or another—doctors, food, medicine, water, temporary shelters, portable hospitals, road and communication repairs, and heavy equipment for removing rubble. The United States, which has always considered Haiti a national-security imperative (because of Haiti’s history of political instability and the United States’ involvement in it and the thorny question of Haitian refugees), put its military in charge of

its aid mission and deployed a contingent of some 14,000 troops (4,500 of them sent ashore, the rest held in reserve offshore on the 18 Navy and Coast Guard ships), 49 helicopters, 7 cargo planes, and 265 government medical personnel. It took control of Port-au-Prince's international airport and began to manage and prioritize the flow of aircraft on the airport's single runway. Despite the fact that it received the explicit approval of President Préval for its military deployment, several Latin American and European countries, including Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Uruguay, Cuba, and France, criticized the United States for militarizing its response to the humanitarian crisis and seeking to occupy Haiti (Caroit, 2010; *Miami Herald*, January 21, 2010; Singh, 2010; AOL News.com, 2010; *Deutsche-Presse Agentur*, January 25, 2010; Wargny, 2010).

I interpret the U.S. response differently. If by "occupation" one means the forceful seizure of a foreign territory and its government and governing that territory directly or by proxy, then what is going on today is not an occupation. The clearest case of the latter happened in 1915, when the United States invaded Haiti, overthrew its government, and controlled the country until 1934. Since then there have been two other cases of U.S. military intervention in Haiti. In 1994, the United States led a UN-authorized force in Haiti to remove a government from power. This time, however, it was to remove the military junta that had toppled Aristide in September 1991—with the tacit support of President George H. W. Bush and the CIA—seven months after he had assumed the presidency and return the duly elected president to office. This was the first time that the United States had returned a president it did not like or trust to power, though in return Aristide had agreed to implement the neoliberal policies devised by the international financial institutions. In 1995, just before he left office, Aristide disbanded the Haitian army. By the time René Préval assumed the presidency in February 1996 all U.S. forces had left, leaving behind a small contingent of some 1,300 UN peacekeeping troops. I would not classify this intervention as an "occupation," since it was willingly endorsed by a duly elected president who had been overthrown illegitimately. Nonetheless, the U.S. decision to return him to power was not unconditional. It required and obtained Aristide's compliance with the neoliberal structural adjustment policies and therefore a break with the progressive agenda he once championed. Yet, for all that, he would never be embraced by the Haitian bourgeoisie and the U.S.-led bloc, and they would in fact collude to remove him from power again after his reelection in 2000.

In February 2004 a ragtag group of some 200 former soldiers and paramilitary death-squad members toppled Aristide three years into his second term and exiled him to South Africa. The United States, which, along with France and Canada, had refused Aristide's request for support—and whose private security consisted of guards supplied by a San Francisco-based security firm—backed his opponents and then led a UN Multinational Interim Force (MIF)—with U.S., Canadian, French, and Chilean troops—to install the illegitimate proxy government of Interim Prime Minister Gérard Latortue. In June 2004, the MIF was replaced by the forces of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), led by Brazil. From February 2004 until February 2006, when René Préval was reelected for his second and final term, I would consider Haiti under occupation, since the invasion met the criteria set out above. Since René Préval took office, however, he has repeatedly asked for the renewal of MINUSTAH's mandate.

By contrast, the United States and the UN (whose troops are led by Brazil) are shoring up a government that has all but collapsed and is incapable of assuming its responsibilities. Whether one likes it or not, the United States is the only country capable of such a large-scale deployment, and that deployment would not be carried out without the military in charge and giving priority to security concerns. Therefore I believe it is important to distinguish between the logistics and the motives of the United States in using its military to carry out its aid and rescue mission. Much of the criticism of the United States has focused on the logistics of its operation, that is, how it is being conducted on the ground (e.g., prioritizing at first U.S. military over other countries' and

civilian flights into the Port-au-Prince airport and diverting others to the Dominican Republic; placing a priority on security over immediate aid and rescue; focusing at first on rescuing and evacuating American citizens and wealthier rather than more densely populated and poorer neighborhoods thought to be less safe) and has confused it with the motives of the United States in using its military in this way.² Given the long history of U.S. involvement in the internal affairs of Haiti—much of it nefarious—it is reasonable to suspect its motives, but it does not follow that every time U.S. troops are on the ground in Haiti amounts to an occupation. That said, however, there is now open talk in the corridors of power in Washington of placing Haiti under some sort of a temporary protectorate, presumably by the UN (McFarquhar, 2010). Some in Haiti, especially among sectors of the intelligentsia, are calling for such a protectorate on the ground that the Préval government is incapable of responding to the crisis and has failed in its responsibilities (see, e.g., Comité Exécutif, 2010; *AlterPresse*, February 1, 2010; *Le Nouvelliste*, January 28, 2010). Were that to happen, Haiti would then be under a full-blown occupation. For now, at least, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is beefing up the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) by sending additional peacekeeping forces and is focusing on economic reconstruction. To that end he announced on January 21 that former U.S. President Bill Clinton, who had already been appointed UN Special Envoy to Haiti, would take on an expanded role in coordinating post-quake reconstruction efforts with the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the European Commission (Ban, 2010).

Pressure is mounting on bilateral and multilateral aid donors to cancel Haiti's debt. In 2009, the international financial institutions cancelled US\$1,238 million of Haiti's debt, but some US\$1,184 billion remain.[1] The United States and the IMF have said that they would work again with the other multilateral and bilateral aid donors to provide debt relief to Haiti, including the interest-free loan of US\$114 million that the IMF extended to Haiti on January 27, 2010. The World Bank said that it would wave any repayment on the US\$38 million Haiti owes it for five years and work to cancel the remaining debt (IMF, 2010a; 2010b; U.S. Treasury Department, 2010). For its part, Venezuela announced that it would cancel the US\$295 million Haiti owes it (Focus News Agency, January 26, 2010). As significant as these measures are, they do not change these institutions' overall policies and goals or repair the damage their policies have done to the Haitian economy over the past four decades.

What, then, needs to be done? New parliamentary elections were scheduled for February and March of this year, but they have been postponed indefinitely. Presidential elections were to be held also in November, but it is unclear whether they will be postponed as well. If the latter were to happen, Haiti would be governed by a legislature and a president without a mandate and hence legitimacy. This would no doubt exacerbate the current crisis of government and could lead to serious social unrest. There is growing discontent with what many are calling "the absentee" or "moribund" state that has failed in its responsibilities, and there are calls for the formation of a "committee of public salvation" or a government of national unity that includes representatives of the different sectors of civil society to replace the current Préval government. However, there are major and possibly irreconcilable differences among these voices. Whereas some are calling for turning Haiti into a protectorate of the United States and the UN, as previously mentioned, others are calling for a break with what they call the "cycle of dependency," including ending MINUSTAH's presence, and the adoption of a different agenda that expresses the needs and priorities of the majority of Haitians (see Coordinating Committee, 2010).

My own view, which for the most part is similar to those expressed by some progressive organizations in Haiti,³ is that Haiti needs to break with the policies advocated by the major powers and international financial institutions that have proved so disastrous for the Haitian economy. These policies are predicated on the belief that Haiti can develop only if it remains

open to the world market, relies on its comparative advantage of low-cost labor to attract foreign investments in the export assembly industry, and prioritizes the production of selected agricultural goods, such as mangoes, for export. Despite the failure of these policies to generate sustainable development, reduce unemployment, and improve the standard of living of the majority of Haitians, the major powers and the international financial institutions continue to advocate them as the solution to Haiti's chronic underdevelopment and poverty. This is shown, for example, in the report written by former World Bank economist Paul Collier for Ban Ki-moon in 2009 and the latter's appointment of Clinton to spearhead that strategy in Haiti. Ignoring the evidence of the past 38 years, Collier's report calls for establishing a cluster of free-trade zones for garment production beyond the two that currently exist in Port-au-Prince and Ouanaminthe and recommends creating similar clusters for the production and export of mangoes (see Collier, 2009; Collier and Warnholz, 2010).

However, the disregard for the consequences of the policies of the international financial institutions would be startling only if one considered that the role of these institutions was actually to promote the development of peripheral countries like Haiti rather than to maintain them in their positions in the international division of labor of the capitalist world-economy as suppliers of cheap labor for foreign investors and markets for goods produced in the advanced or core countries. From my perspective, then, it is time for the Haitian people to mobilize as they did in 1990 to change the status quo, but this time by learning from the mistakes of the past and avoiding placing their faith in false prophets. As it did in 1990, and as articulated by some progressive groups, an agenda for change would need to include the following:

1. Reject all the different versions of the structural adjustment policies of the international financial institutions that require Haiti to remove tariffs on food and other imports, privatize public enterprises, exempt foreign investors from taxes on their profits in the assembly industries, and curb social spending. Haiti could instead negotiate bilateral or multilateral agreements with countries that are willing to provide aid without tying them to the implementation of specific economic or social policies.
2. Launch an immediate large-scale and national public works project to rebuild and expand Haiti's infrastructure, communication, transportation, public schools, public health facilities, and public housing. Here, too, Haiti could rely on bilateral or multilateral agreements to sustain this effort beyond the immediate post-crisis reconstruction now under way with foreign assistance, which will focus primarily on the quake-ravaged areas. But these agreements would have to reflect priorities set by the people of Haiti rather than by those providing aid.
3. Prioritize Haiti's food security and sovereignty by launching an agrarian reform and subsidizing production for the local market as well as for export.
4. Promote the development of local and national agro-industries that use domestic inputs to produce consumer and durable goods and support the national handicraft industry and promote its expansion on the international market.
5. Protect workers' rights, such as the right to form trade unions and the right to strike, and provide a living wage to all workers, including those in the export assembly industries.

It is obvious that these goals cannot be implemented all at once or immediately, but they must serve as the basis for a large-scale popular mobilization to hold the new and democratically constituted government to account and to renegotiate Haiti's relations with the international community.

NOTES

1. Even President Préval acknowledged this fact, though he never addressed these problems during his first administration (February 1996–February 2001) and has not so far in his second term (February 2005–February 2011) (see Caroit, 2010).

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2. Cuba, for example, realized that this was the case, because even though Fidel Castro claimed that U.S. troops were occupying Haiti, the government granted the United States permission to fly its military planes over Cuban soil. It would not have done that if it had really believed that the United States was sending troops to occupy Haiti, since that would have made Cuba complicit. See Castro (2010).

3. I agree with most, but not all, the propositions of the Coordinating Committee of Progressive Organizations cited above.

[REFERENCES](#)

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