

# Haitian disaster in historical context

Despite the prominence of Haiti's earthquake in the media, little is told of its colonial and slave history. **Andile Lungisa** gives some fascinating background and shows how Haiti's colonial legacy in the wake of the disaster is still alive and well.

A devastating earthquake, the worst in 200 years, struck Port-au-Prince in Haiti on 12 January, laying waste to the city and killing thousands of people. The quake detonated more than 30 aftershocks throughout the night to the following morning.

It toppled houses, hotels, hospitals and the capital city's main political buildings, including the presidential palace. The collapse of so many structures sent a giant cloud into the sky, which hovered over the city, raining dust down onto the wasteland below. About 200 000 people died, in a metropolis of 2 million people. Those that survived were living in the streets, afraid to return inside any building that remained standing.

The immediate suffering in Haiti is the result of a natural disaster of biblical proportions. It is also compounded by political disasters of the past two centuries, and the responsibility for those disasters lies both with the Haitian elites and the West, particularly United States policy-makers.

The media coverage of the earthquake is marked by a complete separation of the disaster from the social and political history of Haiti.

Haiti is seen as simply another 'failed state' to be pitied and in need of international intervention.

Few people remember that Haiti has a glorious past.

Journalists have noted that a slave revolt led to the founding of an independent Haiti in 1804 and have made reference to France's subsequent demand for 'reparations' to compensate for its lost property and slaves. This crippled Haiti economically for more than a century. Some journalists have even pointed out that while it was a slave society, the US backed France in this policy and didn't recognise Haiti's independence until the American Civil War in 1865.

The media also make occasional references to the 1915 US invasion under 'liberal' Woodrow Wilson - an occupation that lasted until 1934, and the support the US gave to two brutal Duvalier dictatorships (the infamous 'Papa Doc' and 'Baby Doc') who ravaged the country from 1957 to 1986.

Today there's little discussion of how the problems of contemporary Haiti can be traced to those policies. It is thus important that a brief history of the resilient Haiti is offered in order to contextualise the unfolding tragedy.

## HAITI'S SLAVE HISTORY

Towards the end of the 18th century, Haiti, then Saint Domingue, was France's richest colony. Haiti's sugar plantations and African slaves

provided the economic backbone and renaissance of France.

After the fall of the Bastille during the French revolution in 1796, both Haiti's white slave-owners and emancipated Haitian mulattoes sent representatives to the revolutionary convention in Paris.

Haiti's slave and plantation owners were relieved that the French monarchy and French commercial controls had collapsed because it opened up a new market for them in the neighbouring US. Haiti's mulattoes were enthralled by French revolutionary principles. A Haitian mulatto leader, Lacombe, insisted that freedom, brotherhood and equality were principles which should be observed in Haiti. He was immediately hanged by French slave owners.

Haiti's popular majority, hundreds of thousands of slaves, sent no representatives to revolutionary Paris. Instead they organised themselves, using the cover of voodoo sessions, which were tolerated by French plantation owners who thought their slaves were gathering to dance and worship African gods. Haiti's slaves were modernised proletariats brought together by their work on the big plantations. They too heard the rumours from France and the signals of the revolution.

The first Haitian slave rebellion

took place in August 1791. In northern Saint Domingue 12 000 slaves rose up, ransacked the plantations and hanged their oppressors on the nearest palm trees. This is where Toussaint L'Ouverture, Haiti's revolutionary leader, enters world history. He was a literate, black supervisor on a slave plantation with a fairly tolerant master who was protected by Toussaint against rebellious slaves.

Toussaint realised that the slaves needed military organisation. He raised a black army and had the satisfaction of defeating two European invasions. First he defeated troops sent by revolutionary France to quell the slave rebellion. After that he defeated 100 000 British soldiers, dispatched by Prime Minister William Pitt the younger. The invaders were thoroughly beaten by Haiti's African defenders and by yellow fever.

In France, especially the Jacobins showed great sympathy for revolutionary Haiti, and in 1793 slavery was banned. However, after assuming power, the First Consul, Napoléon Bonaparte, decided to reintroduce slavery and to 'rip the epaulettes off the shoulders of the Negroes'. Napoléon sent in new invading forces.

Haiti survived as an independent nation but was under perpetual pressure from France, England, the US and Spain. Toussaint L'Ouverture eventually died in a French dungeon.

## RECENT HISTORY

Even more glaring is the absence in the media of more recent Haiti-US relations, especially US support for the two coups (1991 and 2004) against a democratically elected president. Jean-Bertrand Aristide won a victory in 1990 by articulating the aspirations of Haiti's poorest citizens, and his populist economic programme irritated both Haitian elites and US policy-makers.

The George Bush (senior) administration condemned the 1991 military coup but gave tacit support to the coup generals. US president, Bill Clinton eventually helped Aristide return to power in 1994, but not until the Haitian leader was forced to capitulate to business-friendly economic policies demanded by the US.

When Aristide won another election in 2000 the George W Bush (junior) administration blocked crucial loans to his government and supported the violent forces attacking Aristide's party. The sad conclusion to that policy came in 2004 when the US military kidnapped Aristide and flew him out of the country.

Aristide today is our guest living in South Africa, blocked by the US from returning to Haiti where he still has many supporters.

## IMPERIALIST PLAN

Two weeks after the earthquake, government ministers, international bankers and aid agencies gathered in Montreal, Canada, to discuss plans for 'reconstructing' ravaged Haiti, a project that theorist Naomi Klein has termed 'Disaster Capital'.

At the heart of the plan is the recolonisation of Haiti and exploitation of its people. Haiti is now run by the US military which has deployed over 13 000 troops and taken control of the country's airport and port facilities.

The US Pentagon dominates the provision of relief, which it has subordinated to the number-one priority of deploying combat-equipped US soldiers and marines to the detriment of injured and hungry Haitians waiting for life-saving medical supplies and food. Behind the talk of Haiti's 'reconstruction', is a plan worked out in the months before the earthquake that is dictated by the profit interests of US banks and

corporations, together with Haiti's wealthy elite.

Speaking to reporters en route from Washington to Montreal, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton referred to this plan and praised the work of her husband, former president Clinton, in seeking to implement it in his position as United Nations' envoy to Haiti. 'He had just had a conference with 500 businesspeople,' she said. 'They were signing contracts, they were making investments'

She continued: 'So we have a plan... It was done in conjunction with other international donors, with the United Nations'. The plan, devised at the behest of the UN last year, is aimed at expanding the Haitian economy through the development of free trade zones based on garment sweatshops in which workers will be paid near-starvation wages. The initiative is based on a report prepared for the UN by Oxford University economics professor Paul Collier.

The report casts Haiti's poverty, the deepest in the Western hemisphere, as its number one asset in the global capitalist economy. 'Due to its poverty and relatively unregulated labour market, Haiti has labour costs that are fully competitive with China, which is the global benchmark,' Collier wrote. This 'asset' is something that both Washington and Haiti's parasitical ruling elite have jealously guarded.

Former President Aristide was overthrown twice in bloody coups orchestrated by the CIA in conjunction with Haitian factory owners, mainly for proposing to raise the country's minimum wage. LB

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