 

More Pain for Devastated Haiti: Under the

Pretense of Disaster Relief, U.S. Running a

Military Occupation

By Arun Gupta

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Official denials aside, the United States has embarked on a new military occupation of Haiti thinly cloaked as disaster relief. While both the Pentagon and the United Nations claimed more troops were needed to provide "security and stability" to bring in aid, according to nearly all independent observers in the field, violence was never an issue.

Instead, there appears to be cruder motives for the military response. With Haiti’s government "all but invisible" and its repressive security forces collapsed, popular organizations were starting to fill the void. But the Western powers rushing in envision sweatshops and tourism as the foundation of a rebuilt Haiti. This is opposed by the popular organizations, which draw their strength from Haiti’s overwhelmingly poor majority. Thus, if a neoliberal plan is going to be imposed on a devastated Haiti it will be done at gunpoint.

The rapid mobilization of thousands of U.S troops was not for humanitarian reasons; in fact it crowded out much of the arriving aid into the Port-au-Prince airport, forcing lengthy delays. Doctors Without Borders said five of its cargo flights carrying 85 tons of medical and relief supplies were turned away during the first week while flights from the World Food Program were delayed up to two days. One WFP official said of the 200 flights going in and out of Haiti daily “most ... are for the U.S. military.” Nineteen days into the crisis, only 32 percent of Haitians in need had received any food (even if just a single meal), three-quarters were without clean water, the government had received only two percent of the tents it had requested and hospitals in the capital reported they were running "dangerously low" on basic medical supplies like antibiotics and painkillers. On Feb. 9, the *Washington Post* reported that food aid was little more than rice, and “Every day, tens of thousands of Haitians face a grueling quest to find food, any food. A nutritious diet is out of the question.”

At the same time, the United States had assumed control of Haiti’s airspace, landed 6,500 soldiers on the ground, with another 15,000 troops offshore at one point, dispatched an armada of naval vessels and nine coast guard cutters to patrol the waters, and the U.S. embassy was issuing orders on behalf of the Haitian government. In a telling account, the New York Times described a press conference in Haiti at which “the American ambassador and the American general in charge of the United States troops deployed here” were “seated at center stage,” while Haitian President René Préval stood in the back “half-listening” and eventually “wandered away without a word."

In the first week, the U.S. commander, Lt. Gen. Ken Keen, said the presence of the Haitian police was “limited” because they had been “devastated" by the earthquake. The real powers in Haiti right now are Keen, U.S. ambassador Louis Lucke, Bill Clinton (who has been tapped by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to lead recovery efforts) and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. When asked at the press conference how long U.S. forces were planning to stay, Keen said, “I’m not going to put a time frame on it" while Lucke added, “We’re not really planning in terms of weeks or months or years. We’re planning basically to see this job through to the end.”

While much of the corporate media fixated on "looters,” virtually every independent observer in Haiti after the earthquake noted the lack of violence. Even Lt. Gen. Keen described the security situation as "relatively calm." One aid worker in Haiti, Leisa Faulkner, said, “There is no security threat from the Haitian people. Aid workers do not need to fear them. I would really like for the guys with the rifles to put them down and pick up shovels to help find people still buried in the rubble of collapsed buildings and homes. It just makes me furious to see multiple truckloads of fellows with automatic rifles."

Veteran Haiti reporter Kim Ives concurred, explaining to “Democracy Now!”: “Security is not the issue. We see throughout Haiti the population themselves organizing themselves into popular committees to clean up, to pull out the bodies from the rubble, to build refugee camps, to set up their security for the refugee camps. This is a population which is self-sufficient, and it has been self-sufficient for all these years.”

In one instance, Ives continued, a truckload of food showed up in a neighborhood in the middle of the night unannounced. “It could have been a melee. The local popular organization...was contacted. They immediately mobilized their members. They came out. They set up a perimeter. They set up a cordon. They lined up about 600 people who were staying on the soccer field behind the house, which is also a hospital, and they distributed the food in an orderly, equitable fashion.... They didn’t need Marines. They didn’t need the UN.”

Traveling with an armored UN convoy on the streets of the capital, Al Jazeera reported that the soldiers “aren’t here to help pull people out of the rubble. They’re here, they say, to enforce the law.” One Haitian told the news outlet, "These weapons they bring, they are instruments of death. We don’t want them. We don’t need them. We are a traumatized people. What we want from the international community is technical help. Action, not words."

A New Invasion

That help, however, is coming in the form of neoliberal shock. With the collapse of the Haitian government, popular organizations of the poor, precisely the ones that propelled Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the presidency twice on a platform of social and economic justice, know that the detailed U.S. and UN plans in the works for “recovery” – sweatshops, land grabs and privatization – are part of the same system of economic slavery they’ve been fighting against for more than 200 years.

A new occupation of Haiti -- the third in the last 16 years -- fits within the U.S. doctrine of rollback in Latin America: support for the coup in Honduras, seven new military bases in Colombia, hostility toward Bolivia and Venezuela. Related to that, the United States wants to ensure that Haiti not pose the "threat of a good example” by pursuing an independent path, as it tried to under President Aristide -- which is why he was toppled twice, in 1991 and 2004, in U.S.-backed coups.

With the government and its repressive security forces now in shambles, neoliberal reconstruction will happen at the barrel of the gun. In this light, the impetus of a new occupation may be to reconstitute the Haitian Army (or similar entity) as a force “to fight the people.”

This is the crux of the situation. Despite all the terror inflicted on Haiti by the United States, particularly in the last 20 years -- two coups followed each time by the slaughter of thousands of activists and innocents by U.S.-armed death squads -- the strongest social and political force in Haiti today is probably the *organisations populaires* (OPs) that are the backbone of the Fanmi Lavalas party of deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Twice last year, after legislative elections were scheduled that banned Fanmi Lavalas, boycotts were organized by the party. In the April and June polls the abstention rate each time was reported to be at least 89 percent.

It is the OPs, while devastated and destitute, that are filling the void and remain the strongest voice against economic colonization. Thus, all the concern about “security and stability.” With no functioning government, calm prevailing, and people self-organizing, “security” does not mean safeguarding the population; it means securing the country against the population. “Stability” does not mean social harmony; it means stability for capital: low wages, no unions, no environmental laws, and the ability to repatriate profits easily.

Sweatshop Solution

In a March 2009 *New York Times* op-ed, Ban Ki-moon outlined his development plan for Haiti, involving lower port fees, “dramatically expanding the country’s export zones,” and emphasizing “the garment industry and agriculture.” Ban’s neoliberal plan was drawn up Oxford University economist Paul Collier. (*Times* columnist Nicholas Kristoff admitted, in promoting Collier’s plan, that those garment factories are "sweatshops.")

Collier is blunt, writing (PDF), “Due to its poverty and relatively unregulated labor market, Haiti has labor costs that are fully competitive with China." His scheme calls for agricultural exports, such as mangoes, that involve pushing farmers off the land so they can be employed in garment manufacturing in export processing zones. To facilitate these zones Collier calls on Haiti and donors to provide them with private ports and electricity, “clear and rapid rights to land," outsourced customs, “roads, water and sewage," and the involvement of the Clinton Global Initiative to bring in garment manufacturers.

Revealing the connection between neoliberalism and military occupation in Haiti, Collier credits the Brazilian-led United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) with establishing “credible security,” but laments that its remaining mandate is “too short for investor confidence.”

In fact, MINUSTAH has been involved in numerous massacres in Port-au-Prince slums that are strongholds for Lavalas and Aristide. But that is probably what Collier means by “credible security.” He also notes MINUSTAH will cost some $5 billion overall; compare that to the $379 million the U.S. government has designated for spending on Haiti in response to the earthquake. It’s worth noting that one-third of the U.S. funding is for “military aid" and another 42 percent is for disaster assistance, such as $23.5 million for "search and rescue" operations that prioritized combing through luxury hotels for survivors.

As for the “U.N. Special Envoy to Haiti,” speaking at an October 2009 investors’ conference in Port-au-Prince that attracted do-gooders like Gap, Levi Strauss and Citibank, Bill Clinton claimed a revitalized garment industry could create 100,000 jobs. The reason some 200 companies, half of them garment manufacturers, attended the conference was because “Haiti’s extremely low labor costs, comparable to those in Bangladesh, make it so appealing,” the *New York Times* reported. Those costs are often less than the official daily minimum wage of $1.75. (The Haitian Parliament approved an increase last May 4 to about $5 an hour, but it was opposed by the business elite and President René Préval refused to sign the bill, effectively killing it. The refusal to increase the minimum wage sparked numerous student protests starting last June, which were repressed by Haitian police and MINUSTAH.)

Roots of Repression

Some historical perspective is in order. In his work *Haiti State Against Nation: The Origins & Legacy of Duvalierism*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes, “Haiti’s first army saw itself as the offspring of the struggle against slavery and colonialism.” That changed during the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. Under the tutelage of the U.S. Marines, “the Haitian Garde was specifically created to fight against other Haitians. It received its baptism of fire in combat against its countrymen." Its brutal legacy led Aristide to disband the army in 1995.

Yet prior to the army’s disbandment, in the wake of the U.S. invasion that returned a politically handcuffed Aristide to the presidency in 1994, "CIA agents accompanying U.S. troops began a new recruitment drive for the agency" that included leaders of the death squad known as FRAPH, according to Peter Hallward, author of *Damning the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*.

It’s worth recalling how the Clinton administration played a double game under the cover of humanitarian intervention. Investigative reporter Allan Nairn revealed that in 1993 "five to ten thousand" small arms were shipped from Florida, past the U.S. naval blockade, to the coup leaders. These weapons enabled FRAPH to multiply and terrorize the popular movements. Then, pointing to intensifying FRAPH violence in 1994, the Clinton administration pressured Aristide into acquiescing to a U.S. invasion because FRAPH was becoming “the only game in town.”

After 20,000 U.S. troops landed in Haiti, they set about protecting FRAPH members, freeing them from jail, and refusing to disarm them or seize their weapons caches. FRAPH leader Emmanual Constant told Nairn that after the invasion the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) was using FRAPH to counter “subversive activities.” Meanwhile, the State Department and CIA went about stacking the Haitian National Police with former army soldiers, many of whom were on the U.S. payroll. By 1996, according to one report, Haitian Army and “FRAPH forces remain armed and present in virtually every community across the country,” and paramilitaries were “inciting street violence in an effort to undermine social order.”

During the early 1990s, a separate group of Haitian soldiers, including Guy Philippe who led the 2004 coup against Aristide, were spirited away to Ecuador where they allegedly trained at a “U.S. military facility." Hallward describes the second coup as beginning in 2001 as a “Contra war” in the Dominican Republic with Philippe and former FRAPH commander Jodel Chamblain as leaders. A "Democracy Now!” report from April 7, 2004 claimed that the U.S.-government funded International Republican Institute provided arms and technical training to the anti-Aristide force in the Dominican Republic, while “200 members of the special forces of the United States were there in the area training these so-called rebels.”

A key component of the campaign against Aristide after he was inaugurated in 2001 was economic destabilization that cut off much of the funding for “road construction, AIDs programs, water works and health care.” A likely factor in the coup was Aristide’s highly public campaign demanding that France repay the money it extorted from Haiti in 1825 for the former slave colony to buy its freedom, estimated in 2003 at $21 billion, or that Aristide was working with Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba to create alternatives to U.S. economic domination of the region.

When Aristide was finally ousted in February 2004, another round of slaughter ensued, with 800 bodies dumped in just one week in March. A 2006 study by the British medical journal *Lancet* (PDF) determined that 8,000 people were murdered in the capital region during the first 22 months of the U.S.-backed coup government and 35,000 women and girls raped or sexually assaulted. The OPs and Lavalas militants were decimated, in part by a UN war against the main Lavalas strongholds in Port-au-Prince’s neighborhoods of Bel Air and Cite Soleil, the latter a densely packed slum of some 300,000. (Hallward claims U.S. Marines were involved in a number of massacres in areas such as Bel Air in 2004.)

‘More Free Trade’

Less than four months after the 2004 coup, reporter Jane Regan described a draft economic plan, the “Interim Cooperation Framework,” that “calls for more free trade zones (FTZs), stresses tourism and export agriculture, and hints at the eventual privatization of the country’s state enterprises.” Regan wrote that the plan was “drawn up by people nobody elected,” mainly “foreign technicians” and “institutions like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank.”

Much of this plan was implemented under Préval, who announced in 2007 plans to privatize the public telephone company, Téléco, and is being promoted by Bill Clinton and Ban Ki-moon as Haiti’s path out of poverty. The *Wall Street Journal* touted such achievements as “10,000 new garment industry jobs,” in 2009 a “luxury hotel complex” in the upper-crust neighborhood of Pétionville, and a $55 million investment by Royal Caribbean International at its “private Haitian beach paradise,” surrounded by “a ten-foot-high iron wall, watched by armed guards,” just north of the capital. (That “investment,” according to the cruise line operator, included “a new 800-foot pier, a Barefoot Beach Club with private cabanas, an alpine roller coaster with individual controls for each car, new dining facilities and a new, larger Artisan’s Market.”)

Haiti, of course, has been here before when the U.S. Agency for International Development spoke of turning it into the “Taiwan of the Caribbean.” In the 1980s, under Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, it shifted one third of cultivated land to export crops while “there were some 240 multinational corporations, employing between 40,000 and 60,000 predominantly female workers,” sewing garments, baseballs for Major League Baseball and Disney merchandise, according to scholar Yasmine Shamsie. Those jobs, paying as little as 11 cents an hour, coincided with a decline in per capita income and living standards. (Ban Ki-moon wants Haiti to emulate Bangladesh, where sweatshops pay as little as 6 cents an hour.) At such low pay, workers had little left after purchasing food and transportation to and from the factories. These self-contained export-processing zones, often funded by USAID and the World Bank, also add little to the national economy, importing tax free virtually all the materials used. The elite use the tax-free import structure to smuggle in luxury goods. In response, the government taxed consumption-based items more, hitting the poor the hardest.

U.S.-promoted agricultural policies, such as forcing Haitian rice farmers to compete against U.S.-subsidized agribusiness, cost an estimated 830,000 rural jobs according to Oxfam, while exacerbating malnourishment. This and the decimation of the invaluable Creole pig (because of fears of an outbreak of African swine fever), led to displacement of the peasantry into urban areas, along with the promise of urban jobs, fueled rural migration into flimsy shantytowns. It’s hard not to conclude that these development schemes played a major role in the horrific death toll in Port-au-Prince.

The latest scheme, on hold for now because of the earthquake, is a $50 million "industrial park that would house roughly 40 manufacturing facilities and warehouses,” bankrolled by the Soros Economic Development Fund (yes, that Soros). The planned location is Cite Soleil. James Dobbins, former special envoy to Haiti under President Bill Clinton, outlined other measures in a *New York Times* op-ed: “This disaster is an opportunity to accelerate oft-delayed reforms” including “breaking up or at least reorganizing the government-controlled telephone monopoly. The same goes with the Education Ministry, the electric company, the Health Ministry and the courts.”

It’s clear that the Shock Doctrine is alive and well in Haiti. But given the strength of the *organisations populaires* and weakness of the government, it will have to be imposed through force.

For those who wonder why the United States is so obsessed with controlling a country so impoverished, devastated and seemingly inconsequential as Haiti, Noam Chomsky sums it up best. “Why was the U.S. so intent on destroying northern Laos, so poor that peasants hardly even knew they were in Laos? Or Indochina? Or Guatemala? Or Maurice Bishop in Grenada, the nutmeg capital of the world? The reasons are about the same, and are explained in the internal record. These are ‘viruses’ that might ‘infect others’ with the dangerous idea of pursuing similar paths to independent development. The smaller and weaker they are, the more dangerous they tend to be. If they can do it, why can’t we? Does the Godfather allow a small storekeeper to get away with not paying protection money?”

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