The 7.0 magnitude earthquake that devastated Haiti on 12 January 2010 continues to devastate. The earthquake has killed tens of thousands and left millions homeless. Casualties now, however, are now being caused by the lack of aid on the ground. Despite the world’s efforts to get aid to Haiti, aid organisations are struggling to get these supplies to the people: ‘little help has reached the many people waiting for help in makeshift camps on streets strewn with debris and decomposing bodies.’

The primary problem: an airport bottleneck. The US military has taken over Port-au-Prince’s small airport, which is currently the main entry point for aid. Aircraft carrying aid supplies are being denied permission to land. There is increasing frustration and confusion as to why the aid that is mounting up at the airport is not being allowed to be distributed.

While Time magazine paints a picture of violence interrupting aid efforts, there are those defending the victims of the earthquake. Andy Kershaw demands that we ‘stop treating these people like savages’. The consensus that aid will create a second nightmare is severely misconstrued, and ‘it is the Haitians who best know where the aid is needed’, not the ‘gibbering strike force of box-tickers’.

While aid efforts were, in fact, hampered by the powerful aftershock on Wednesday 19 January which further destabilised buildings and infrastructure, much criticism is being made of the US handling of the crisis. The US is being heavily criticised for ‘blocking aid’ and running a poor coordinating operation. The aid that is being distributed is being delivered to large-scale camps rather than small isolated areas where hundreds are still awaiting assistance.

Medicin Sans Frontiere is calling this ‘an unacceptable situation in Haiti as redirected air shipments slow capacity response and treatment’.

The US emphasis on military coordination and security is raising questions as to whether this is a humanitarian operation or an invasion. The US approach has been starkly contrasted with that of, for example, Cuba and Iceland who were the first on the ground. The Wall Street Journal reported, ‘... a team of Cuban doctors were seen Monday treating hundreds of patients without a gun or soldier in sight’.

It has not gone unnoticed either, that the US media either wrongly reported Cuba missing from aid attempts, or have ignored Cuba’s presence. Cuba, though, was already there.

Yet criticism of the US extends beyond their immediate control of the crisis. Commentators are asking why Haiti has been so badly affected. The devastation is being seen as partly natural disaster, but also manmade. The finger of blame is being pointed at the West. Peter Hallward writes: ‘... it's no accident that so much of Port-au-Prince now looks like a war zone. Much of the devastation
wreaked by this latest and most calamitous disaster to befall Haiti is best understood as another thoroughly manmade outcome of a long and ugly historical sequence.’ Hallward reminds us that while we praise the ‘noble “international community”’ for its aid efforts, it is they who are most to blame for the extent of devastation. The poverty and powerlessness in Haiti has been created through colonial exploitation and continued postcolonial oppression.

Haiti’s earthquake is being flagged as a reminder to the world that ‘Haiti constitutes the disgrace of our era [13], in a world where the exploitation and pillage of the vast majority of the planet’s inhabitants prevails.’

The parts played by the US and France in Haiti’s oppression have come under particular scrutiny. An Open Letter to David Brookes [14], is a vehement criticism of those who mistakenly forget the legacy of Haiti’s international debt that has been imposed on Haiti for centuries by France and the US. Haiti’s international debt dates back to its independence in 1804: ‘The Haitian people had the audacity to break their chains and declare independence in 1804 but were later forced by France to re-purchase their freedom for 150 million Francs, a burden that the country has had to carry throughout the twentieth century.’ US aid to the country, the letter further points out, is not the kind that alleviates poverty.

Robert Parry [15] argues, however, that the debt is not Haiti’s to the US, but the US’s to Haiti. Looking back to Haiti’s independence he portrays how the wealth generation of the slave trade and concepts of freedom affected America’s own history, a history which might have been quite different without Haiti. ‘The time has come’ argues Bill Fletcher Jr [16], ‘for France and the USA to repay the debt.’

The profiteering that has risen out of the Haiti’s devastation has attracted attention. Private security companies [17], while claiming to be offering humanitarian assistance, are doing so for a price, working for the highest bidder in the hunt for loved ones.

Benjamin Dangl [18] argues, though, that it is more than private security companies that seek to gain from the crisis ‘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.’ Haiti’s disaster is already being exploited. Naomi Klein, writer of ‘The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism’, pointed to the Heritage Foundation’s website post as an example of this where they state, ‘In addition to providing immediate humanitarian assistance, the US 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.’

In amongst criticism, however, are hard reminders of the tragedy that has yet to unfurl too. The star.com writes that vulnerability of girls and young women [19] existed before the earthquake, the danger has now increased. Relief efforts need to also focus on preventing them from being victimised. Questions about the fate of orphans, the subjects of child trafficking, are also being asked.

Then there are comments by those asking what Haiti and its devastation represent. Ben Roberts [20] believes Haiti has a dual personality: ‘Simply put, Haiti represents the unlimited potential for the human race to overcome and move into the light. Alternately, it represents the ugliness and darkness of the human race.’

For many, though, Haiti’s earthquake represents a chance to act. The International Action Center [21] has listed their demands to the US:

- ‘Immediate delivery of food, water and medical supplies, not military occupation
- Allow the return of democratically elected President Aristide to Haiti and restore his government
- Reparations from the U.S., France and Canada so that Haitians can take charge of the relief effort and invite the international assistance of their choice
- Immediate cancellation of Haiti’s debts
- Immediate asylum for all Haitians in the United States
- Permission for Haitian residents of the U.S. to go to Haiti to help their families and to return to the US
- Self-determination for Haiti.

While the spotlight is on Haiti, it seems demands are being made where they could not be before.

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(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementById(id)) return; js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src = "//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js#xfbml=1&appid=1465091963738031&version=v2.0"; fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); })(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk');

Article-Summary:
It has taken an earthquake of 7.0 magnitude, causing momentous loss of life, to get the world talking about Haiti and its past. As the world digests the tragedy, it begins to remember and to criticise too. Rebecca Zausmer does a round-up of the commentary and analysis that is flowing fast about Haiti and the actors in its history.

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