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What's behind the US occupation of Haiti?

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

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Haiti seems to be the latest victim in the US efforts to recompose its imperialist hegemony in Latin America. Of course this direct US occupation is creating some friction with others that have interest in Haiti: France and Brazil, but that's why the so-called "friends of Haiti" will meet in Canada on Monday 25th to deal with their differences and decide what way forward for Haiti –of course, without any real involvement of Haitians themselves.

Anyone judging from the huge numbers of troops mobilised to Haiti could reasonably believe that this is a country in the middle of a brutal civil war instead of a nation hit by a deadly earthquake. While the Media has been feeding constantly news of murder, mayhem, and gangsters supposedly in control of Haitian streets, together with calls for a "strong arm" and "security" to make possible the delivery of relief, the reality seems to be quite another. Medical and Food assistance has been largely delayed by a cobweb of inefficiency, bureaucracy and negligence and not for "security" issues. In the meantime, hungry and thirsty Haitians have been largely looking for their beloved ones under the rubble with their bare hands. Very few doctors and relief agencies have dared to go to the

streets of Port-au-Prince, where precious assistance –currently stockpiling in the airport- is much needed.

Violence seems to be quite exceptional and whatever “looting” has happened it is only natural considered the fact that this people have had to endure an enormous suffering and have been completely destitute for over a week! The repressive response of the local police and the foreign military to these isolated acts of desperation only adds insult to injury –the people are hungry and instead of deploying soldiers carrying guns, they should rather deploy more food, water and medicines. And certainly, security does not seem to be the top priority of Haitians themselves, judging by the exceptional reports of those who actually get to speak to Haitians sleeping on the streets. It seems clear the security issues are being blown out of proportions in order to justify a further increase of military presence in the island –particularly of the US and the UN.

While the US claims to have moved into the Haiti purely out of “humanitarian” reasons, both the appalling record of the US towards its neighbour and the actions it has taken there, cast a shadow of doubts over its true intentions. Their occupation of the ruins of the Presidential Palace gives an undeniable symbolism as to what they see to be their role in Haiti at present. The US has also taken control of ports and has imposed a strict naval blockade to avoid desperate Haitian boats people being washed ashore in Florida. They obviously seem more interested in Haitians not leaving the island than on help coming in: this has been proven beyond reasonable doubt by the US control of the National airport, granted by the puppet regime of Rene Preval. The occupation of this neuralgic point, where most aid arrives, has attracted widespread criticism since they are not allowing medical and humanitarian supplies to land –including flights from Caricom, Venezuela, Cuba, Turkey, Iran, from Doctors without Borders, from the World Food Programme, etc. It is actually the US occupation of

the airport the main responsible for aid not reaching Haitians in need for almost two weeks, with disastrous consequences: thousands of people have died because of this brutal act of neglect.

Why aid was not allowed to arrive? To give priority to over 10,000 US troops which are currently occupying the country! Soldiers have been given priority to doctors, water and food. Also, it seems that politics had something to do with the refusal to allow Venezuelan, Cuban and other cargoes of so called “rogue States” to land.

But if there are no real “security” concerns in Haiti, why the US would send all those troops?

It is no mystery that the US has lost ground in Latin America since Bush “War on Terror” shift massively the US focus to the Middle East and surrounding areas. This military adventure greatly damaged the US in economic, political and military terms, but during that time Latin American governments in general could develop foreign relations in a significantly more independent fashion. This was acknowledged by Obama on May 23rd, 2008, while still on presidential campaign, when in a meeting with the Cuban American community deplored that Bush “neglected Latin America”, allowing others to gradually displace US influence –he mentioned openly Venezuela and China. US domination has been facing challenges because Latin America has started to attract numerous other investors and increased the role of other trade partners than the US – China, South Africa, Iran, Russia, the EU to name but a few. The emergence of a regional power such as Brazil and the integration projects led by Lula and Chávez are also frowned in Washington.

So what is Obama policy towards Latin America? As stated in the above mentioned conference, it is in a nutshell to isolate Venezuela and its allies; and to reinforce the military presence in the region (he mentioned both Plan Colombia and Plan Mérida, for Mexico and Central America).

It is clear that the plan of taking over again Latin America has already started:

- the IV Fleet of the US Navy re-formed on 2008 thus strengthening the US Southern Command (which oversees Latin America);
- the military coup in Honduras which was sponsored by sectors of the US military. It produced the desired effect of recapturing one of the most faithful allied countries of the US in Central America from a populist and unreliable (to US eyes) leader who allied to Chavez, while at the same time shifted the regional political spectrum further to the right (scaring off Funes in El Salvador and Colom in Guatemala);
- the intensification of the military presence in Colombia and of US military support for the totalitarian regime of Uribe through the opening of 7 new military bases in that country (there are already three US bases there, and the US will also be able to use, on request, any port or airport in that country and use its air space at any time). It is not an exaggeration to say that the US has actually managed to turn Colombia into a military platform for the whole hemisphere.

So it is when we consider all these actions taken by the late Bush and the Obama administration that the occupation of Haiti starts making sense. An island in the middle of the Caribbean, facing Cuba and Venezuela, strategically located at the crossroads between Central, South and North America, with a recent history of popular revolt and attempts at political and social reform that were confronted murderously by the staunch Cold War allies of the US in Haiti, the descent of the Duvalier dictatorship who still remain in power seems like the obvious candidate for a direct military presence.

Haiti itself reflects the ground the US is trying to recover –the country is currently occupied by a UN sponsored military force led by Brazil. Although the UN occupation originally started with direct US presence and serving Washington strategic interests in the region back in 2004, the changing balance of power in the region forced the US to give the UN the lead in this occupation while it focused on the mess they left in Iraq. Now it is time for the US to take over Haiti again and take advantage of this tragic earthquake in order to increase its military presence in the region and advance its own geostrategic objectives. Of course this direct US occupation is creating some friction with others that have interest in Haiti: France and Brazil, but that's why the so-called "friends of Haiti" will meet in Canada on Monday 25th to deal with their differences and decide what way forward for Haiti –of course, without any real involvement of Haitians themselves.

So Haiti seems to be the latest victim in the US efforts to recompose its imperialist hegemony in Latin America. It is up to the Latin American people to mobilise their solidarity with the voices resisting in Haiti against enormous odds, in order to avoid new victims in this conquest strategy.