

Cholera epidemic sparks clashes between Haitians and UN troops

VIOLENT CLASHES in Haiti between protesters and United Nations troops on 14 November left at least two dead and 16 wounded in the country's second city, Cap-Haitien. Street barricades forced shut the city's public buildings and airport and a police station was set alight. Other protests and shootings were reported in Hinche and Gonaïves. The unrest also spread to the capital, Port-au-Prince, which was devastated by January's earthquake that left 250,000 dead and millions homeless.

Niall Mulholland,
CWI

The protests were sparked by the outbreak of a cholera epidemic that has, so far, officially caused over 1,000 deaths and 1,000 new cases every day. There is widespread speculation that Nepalese UN troops inadvertently introduced the disease, which closely resembles a south Asian variant.

When Hurricane Tomas brushed the island on 5 November, the waterways spilled over, creating ideal conditions for the spread of cholera. This reinforced long-standing resentment towards UN troops amongst Haitians. UN 'peace-keeping' troops have grown to 12,000 since a coup, with US backing, overthrew the 'leftist' populist president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in 2004.

There is also widespread anger towards the government of president René Prével, which is regarded as corrupt and feeble and blamed for failing to stop the spread of cholera. Foreign diplomats are now speculating whether elections set for 28 November will go ahead.

What began as an isolated diarrhoea case one month ago in the rural Artibonite valley, has rapidly led to over 17,000 people being taken to hospital. Epidemiologists warn that now it is in the water supply it can last for months or years. The disease has now reached Port-au-Prince, which is still in ruins following January's earthquake.

Cholera is caused by a waterborne bacterium called vibrio cholerae. Left untreated, it causes diarrhoea, vomiting, dehydration and shock. It can kill within just 24 hours.

The disease creates few problems where there is clean water, sanitation and hygiene but Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, is particularly vulnerable. There is not one sewage plant in the whole country, although the rich have septic systems in their homes.



UN troops are widely seen by Haitians as an occupying force, acting in the interests of western capitalism.

Even before the earthquake, most Haitians lived in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. Now many of Port-au-Prince's three million people live in tent cities, next to open sewers. Throughout the country, many people are forced to get water from the same rivers where people also wash and defecate.

Cholera is relatively easy to cure if patients are given antibiotics in time but Haiti's impoverished health service is hopelessly unable to cope. Poverty and a ruined infrastructure mean many Haitians come looking for medical help too late, or not at all.

Reconstruction

THE UNITED Nations estimates that 200,000 Haitians could get infected by the disease and appealed to the 'international community' for a \$163 million emergency aid appeal. But the appalling 'humanitarian' record of the major capitalist governments towards Haiti can give the poor no confidence whatsoever.

Ten months after the earthquake, 1.5 million Haitians remain homeless and most of Port-au-Prince is still reduced to rubble. Only a tiny fraction of the \$5 billion pledged by world governments for reconstruction,

including over \$1 billion from its neighbouring US superpower, has actually reached Haiti.

The plethora of largely unaccountable charities and NGOs that have sprung up in Haiti in recent years, can, at best, only benefit a tiny fraction of the tide of humanity that is in desperate need.

On the basis of capitalism, the vast majority of Haitians will remain impoverished, jobless, illiterate and hungry and living in shantytowns and tents.

This existence means that the mass of people will remain highly vulnerable to diseases and 'natural disasters'. Some 80% live below the poverty line. Joblessness sits at a staggering 75%.

More than ever, the Haitian masses need to have democratic control of the resources in society. Socialists call for immediate and fully funded emergency medical aid to combat the cholera epidemic, as well as a massive post-earthquake reconstruction programme, planned and organised through elected committees of workers, land labourers and poor people in every area.

The masses of Haiti urgently need good quality, quake-proof standard housing, hospitals, schools, roads and infrastructure, including access to clean water and sanitation,

and other vital public resources and services.

Socialists oppose the unjust trade policies imposed on Haiti by the big capitalist powers and call for all foreign debts to be cancelled. We call for jobs and a living wage for all and for state subsidies for struggling small farmers. Living standards can only be transformed by bringing the main planks of the economy into public ownership, under democratic workers' control and management.

Change

FOR DECADES, Haiti has been plagued by poverty, joblessness and military dictatorships. The huge social gap between the poor Creole-speaking black majority, that makes up 95% of the population, and the French-speaking rich, 1% of whom own nearly half the country's wealth, remains untouched.

Workers and the poor in Haiti need their own independent class organisations, trade unions and a mass party with a socialist programme, to fight for real fundamental change.

Socialists demand an end to imperialist meddling - UN forces out of Haiti - and stand for a socialist Haiti, as part of a voluntary and equal socialist federation of the Caribbean.

Massive food price hikes spell disaster for poorest people

THE FINANCIAL speculators and hedge funds that so spectacularly contributed to the financial crisis resulting in the 'Great Recession' have now turned their attention to the international food market with devastating consequences.

John Sharpe

These spivs are now trading heavily in the futures markets in food, speculating on prices and causing extreme volatility.

The UN Food and Agricultural Organisation reported: "Rarely have markets exhibited this level of uncertainty and sudden turns in such a brief period of time. World cereal production this year, which

is currently put at 2,216 million tonnes, is 2% below 2009 levels, 63 million tonnes less than the forecast reported in June."

The UN has warned that food prices could rise by 10-20% next year after poor harvests and an expected rundown of global reserves. More than 70 African and Asian countries will be the worst hit.

Combined with the heatwave and fires in Russia and the floods in Pakistan, this has resulted in the prices of wheat, maize and many other foods traded internationally rising by up to 40% in just a few months.

Sugar, butter and cassava prices are at 30-year highs, and meat and fish are both significantly more expensive than last year.

Larry Elliot in the Guardian

has argued that these massive increases are also due to speculators buying up farms in poor countries to profit from China's increasing reliance on imported food. This in turn increases poor countries' reliance on expensive imported food.

International food import bills could pass the \$1 trillion mark and the speculators cannot resist getting their noses into a trough that size.

The 2007/08 food crisis saw food riots in more than 25 countries and 100 million extra hungry people. The UN fears similar for next year.

As Lester Brown, founder of the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute, pointed out: "The poorest will suffer the most because

they feel the effect of price rises directly".

With one and a half billion people globally struggling to get by on between \$1 and \$2 a day, capitalism has nothing to offer them - not even enough food in their bellies.

But while the world's poorest people are suffering, big business is enjoying a profits bonanza in global agriculture and its associated trade. In the advanced capitalist countries working people are also increasingly struggling with rising food prices.

Socialist nationalisation of the agribusiness multinationals and a democratically run, international plan of food production represents the only way forward for the poor and the working people of the world.

the **committee for a**
workers international

THE COMMITTEE for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated. The CWI is organised in 40 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world. For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email cwi@worldsoc.co.uk

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