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From The Times
 January 18, 2010

Fear of the poor is hampering Haiti rescue

American views rule among the rubble of Port-au-Prince. That's one reason aid is taking so long to get to those in need

Linda Polman

Aid workers have already baptised the earthquake in Haiti a "historical disaster". It will rate high in the annals of the humanitarian aid world because of the number of victims and scale of the destruction. But the rescue operation is also becoming notorious for the slowness with which aid is reaching the victims. Five days after the quake hit, many places are still largely bereft of international aid.

Not through lack of funds, supplies or emergency experts. Those are all pouring in from dozens of countries. But most of the aid — and aid workers — seems stuck at the airport.

Rescue teams have pulled survivors from five-star hotels, university buildings, a supermarket and the UN headquarters, all in Port-au-Prince's better neighbourhoods. In poor areas, where the damage appears much greater, apparently forgotten victims report on Twitter that they have yet to encounter the first foreign rescuer.

Many aid workers are reported to have orders not to venture out without armed guards — which are not there at all, or only after long debates with the UN military command. The UN has lost a number of staff in the quake, and is not keen to risk more lives.

But the Haitian people seem to scare aid workers more than Somali warlords, Darfuri Janjawid or Afghan Taleban.

Frightened Dutch aid workers abandoned a mission without reaching the collapsed building where people were trapped, and frightened doctors have left their patients unattended.

The experience of CNN's medical reporter, Dr Sanjay Gupta, is telling. In a makeshift clinic he encountered a Belgian medical team being evacuated in a UN bus. UN "rules of engagement" apparently stopped them providing security for the doctors. The Belgians took most of their medical supplies with them, to keep them out of the claws of robbers.

Dr Gupta and his camera team stayed the night, monitored the abandoned patients' vital signs and continued intravenous drips — and they were not robbed. Some rescuers are leaning so much toward security that they will allow people to die.

The media are not helping. CNN rules in the rubble. "Outside of a military conflict, this is our biggest international deployment since the tsunami in 2004," according to Tony Maddox, the managing director of CNN International. So the image of the aid operation being beamed back is primarily American — and one of the big problems is the American view of Haiti.

CNN won't stop telling aid workers and the outside world about pillaging (the incidence of which — for the first four frustrating days at least — did not compare with what happened after Hurricane Katrina) and about how dangerous it is to distribute food, because of the likelihood of "stampedes".

Nor is the US Government, the biggest player in the aid operation, doing anything to help to relax the atmosphere. On the contrary. When President Obama said that the US aid effort would be "aggressive" he meant it. The humanitarian operation is not led by civilian agencies, but by the Pentagon.

Mr Obama ordered 9,000 troops and a fleet of nuclear-powered ships to move in. Victims of the war in Congo (which has cost five million lives in the past years) and of the genocide in Darfur would love so much American attention — but it is Haiti's fate to lay in America's backyard and to have been a sore to American eyes for decades already.

One, perhaps even two million Haitians already live in the United States, but more try to come. Every day dead Haitian refugees wash up on Miami's sunny beaches. Haiti is a constant pain for US taxpayers who feel that the billions of dollars

that have been poured in should have at least lifted the country out of its position as one of the poorest places on Earth. Even when the earthquake struck, investigations were taking place into the fate of several million dollars of aid funds, sent to victims of a hurricane that hit Haiti in 2008, that have disappeared.

Furthermore, to the horror of many godfearing Americans, voodoo is an officially recognised religion in Haiti. And, perhaps above all, Haitians are poor and black. In the view of some Americans those two add up to ... murderous gangs.

The invasion of soldiers and humanitarian workers at the airport of Port-au-Prince reminds me of the American military invasion of Haiti authorised by President Clinton in 1994. I'd lived and worked there for almost two years as a correspondent for Dutch radio. There were 20,000 soldiers but they were surprisingly nervous about what reception the unarmed Haitians might have in store for them.

It turned out to be a wave of slum dwellers streaming to the air and sea port to greet the American guests. In abundant conga lines they snaked through the city, tea cosies on their heads to express just how happy they were. "Liberté! Merci Beel Cling Dong!" they shouted. A terrified American GI, still a teenager, saw the mass of pitiful creatures approaching him, and asked me if the tea cosies were "some kinda voodoo?". He calmed down only when a line of BMWs and Mitsubishis appeared and filed past to watch the invasion.

Where the soldier came from, the owners of vehicles like these are respectable citizens. In Haiti, they are likely to be the ones smuggling drugs and making US aid dollars disappear. The good guys in Haiti are the defenceless people in the slums. For Western city dwellers, this is the world turned upside down. "Back! Back!" the soldier shouted, aiming his weapons at the good guys.

The rescue teams that stay put at the airport are one reason why we still don't really know what is going on. Seventy survivors had been pulled from the rubble so far, the International Red Cross said on Sunday. That's 14 rescues per day as a joint result of the 1,739 international specialised rescue workers that are there. That number would surely jump if some of the professional equipment that they brought was made available to the countless groups of local people desperately digging for victims with their bare hands, day and night.

Let's hope that the food distributors worrying about their safety know that yesterday hundreds of people in Port-au-Prince dropped to their knees praying outside a warehouse where workers for the agency Food for the Poor had announced that they would be distributing rice and beans. The crowd allowed children and the elderly to go first in line without having guns aimed at them first.

Linda Polman's War Games: The Story of War and Aid in Modern Times will be published by Penguin in April