

## **Another Unnatural Disaster**

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Sorrows cascaded on Gonaives last month- the storm itself was bad enough under any circumstances, but it descended on a quarter million people (the size of half of Boston) who had not been warned or helped to higher ground. When the rain relented, bad roads stopped rescuers, and help that did get through was stolen by the local "freedom fighters." At least 2,500 people were killed, and the remaining water and corpses threaten survivors with deadly diseases. All this on top of a murderous year in the City of Independence, that should have been proudly celebrating Haiti's bicentennial.

Many of us- people who know Haiti well and those who first heard of Gonaives this year- struggle to comprehend the tragedy's vastness, and to find meaning or at least an explanation for such suffering.

Some point up to the heavens for answers. But Jeanne hit Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Barbados and the U.S. as a full hurricane, killing thirty-four people in all those places combined. She was only a tropical storm when she killed seventy times that number in Haiti.

Others point up too, but not as high- to the mountain farmers who cut down the trees that in other countries slow the rain down. But the farmers would not cut the trees if they had a choice- they know better than the experts what happens when rain hits a deforested slope, because it rushes away with the topsoil that is needed for next year's crop and is many farmers' only legacy for their children. But legacies and next year's crop mean nothing when the children are dying now, so the farmer cuts and sells the tree to buy today's medicine and food.

The farmers may point up as well, up north to the governments and international financial institutions. Some sit in offices beautifully paneled with tropical hardwood, all sit in countries where people are not forced to sell next year's life to survive this year. The farmers know that Haiti's peasants did not start the deforestation- Moreau de St. Mery, a French administrator, complained of deforestation during the slavery era, American firms harvested trees in industrial batches in the 20th century. The farmers also know that people in comfortable offices in comfortable countries impose the crushing national debts, the embargoes, and the "economic reforms" that force poor countries to cut already inadequate programs for healthcare, education and environmental protection. They know when the government cannot provide a safety net, the trees must, no matter the cost.

"Captain Meteo," Renan Jean-Louis, has been Haiti's preeminent weatherman since the Duvaliers. He did not survive three decades of political and natural storms by mixing meteorology with politics. But he saw this storm coming, as did anyone who listened to news or clicked on a weather website. Everyone knew that the water would stream quickly down the deforested mountains- Haiti's interim Minister of Agriculture even wrote a book in 2002 about Haiti's vulnerability to natural disasters, which listed Gonaives as the largest area of extreme risk for flooding. But unlike every other government in Jeanne's path, Haiti's government did not warn or evacuate its citizens. Mr. Jean-Louis called this "negligence and nonchalance," and blamed it for many preventable deaths.

Haiti's interim government will point to its lack of resources: not enough trucks or money for supplies, poor roads and little disaster response training. But last hurricane season Haiti had a functioning Civil Protection Office, set up with the help of the United States Agency for International Development and the Pan American Development Foundation. Last year, twenty-three local civil protection committees were formed, and over 5,000 people were trained in disaster awareness. The Civil Protection Office had plans to warn communities of approaching storms and to provide emergency assistance.

The Civil Protection Office, its committees, network and supplies were attacked along with the rest of Haiti's constitutional government earlier this year. The government's trucks were burned, officials were killed, arrested or forced into hiding, the offices where planning was done were ransacked. This infrastructure has not been rebuilt anywhere, especially in Gonaives where the government has left the running of the city to the gangs that brought it to power.

The Gonaives gangs, like their allies in Port-au-Prince acquired their power by the bullet, not the ballot. They cannot be voted out for negligence or nonchalance, or even for stealing food from starving women outside disaster relief centers. Neither the government nor the UN troops has made a serious effort to dislodge them by force. To the contrary, the UN cooperates with them on "security matters," the Prime Minister praises them as "freedom fighters."

All of the other countries in Jeanne's path have an elected government accountable to the voters, with enough resources to provide a minimum of basic services, especially healthcare, nutrition, education and security against natural and unnatural threats. That these countries endured the hurricane's wrath with such little loss of life shows that their democracies, if imperfect, do work.. Haiti proved once again the limits of government by dictatorship and anarchy, a lesson already known too well from the Gonaives plain to the bare mountaintops.