

Haiti – fed on dependency, starved of independence

‘Haiti was more than the New World’s second oldest republic ...more than even the first black republic of the modern world. Haiti was the first *free* nation of *free* men to arise within, and in resistance to, the emerging constellation of Western European empire.’

Ira Lowenthal, anthropologist

Background

Haiti has been on display following a shocking earthquake. The world saw its belly torn open, bodies lined up on streets, survivors wailing in unimaginable grief¹, and desperate people labeled ‘looters’. Poverty and unpreparedness for this earthquake are not just facts of life: they have a history of causes – where human ill-will has played a major role.

I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says ‘They’re looting. You see a white family, it says, ‘They’re looking for food’.

A rapper condemning media portrayal of Black people

Christopher Columbus claimed the island (then named it Hispaniola) for Spain in 1492. 200 years later Hispaniola was divided: the east (now the Dominican Republic) was controlled by Spain; the west was ceded to France which began by developing coffee and sugar plantations. Hundreds of thousands of people were ‘imported’ from Africa as slaves to work on the plantations over the next century. Conditions were appalling and many were literally worked to death. With such low labour costs, the owners soon grew fat on the profits. The sweet smell of revolution in France in 1789 made its way to its Caribbean colony and in 1791 the slaves revolted. The French unable to suppress the rebellion as slaves outnumbered their masters by ten to one finally left in 1805. Haiti is the only nation to gain independence by a slave-led rebellion. But not for long. The French came back 20 years later with gunboats to demand reparations of 150 million francs (about \$US21 billion today) for the loss of its economic and human property. This crushing debt, though later reduced, was not paid off until 1947. Haiti was never allowed to be politically or economically independent². **Haiti** capitulated to the extortion marking the beginning of a long history of haemorrhage. The debt was only settled in 1947. In order to survive they were forced to borrow money at enormous rates from American, French and German banks.³

Further Misery

Between 1843 and 1915 Haiti had 22 heads of state. In 1915, the USA invaded allegedly to restore ‘stability’ following the murder of President Guillaume Sam and they remained in control for 19 years. Haitians opposed this presence despite some improvements made by the Americans to the infrastructure. It needs to be born in mind that in the same period the USA invaded Nicaragua, Cuba and Honduras. Every attempt at self-government was thwarted.

Political coups and natural disasters have plagued the country. In 1957, Francois (Papa Doc) Duvalier, a doctor and union leader, as elected president oversaw a regime, notorious for corruption, torture and terrorism. The USA, in the logic of the Cold War, supported this repressive regime in order to keep the Soviets out. Duvalier was succeeded by his 19

year old son, Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier. The continued repression forced many of its educated people into exile. In 1986, the U.S. helped oust Jean-Claude Duvalier⁴. **In 1994, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected president and one of his initiatives was to demand that France return the extorted money which he calculated to be \$21.7 billion including 179 years of compound interest. In 2004, the USA helped to abduct this democratically and popularly elected and president.**⁵ Haiti was actually robbed of democracy by two US-aided coups against Jean Bertrand Aristide. He is still denied a passport and forbidden to return to Haiti⁶.

There have been calls against the IMF imposing detrimental economic policy conditions on Haiti such as the privatisation of public services, which undermine democratic governance and economic well-being⁷. **IMF and World Bank** have aggravated what the people call the 'development of underdevelopment'. Free trade has destroyed agricultural production which contributed to a food crisis and growing a sweatshop economy. Farmers were forced to move to Port-au-Prince to seek work. Though international financial institutions will most likely never get back the capital, their creditor role will permit them to still control the government's economic policies.⁸

Haiti needs genuine allies. It does not need to be occupied under the cover of aid. Just over a week after the earthquake it was evident that that the initial phase of the US-led relief operation conformed to three tendencies that have shaped Haiti's recent history. The USA adopted military priorities and strategies. It sidelined Haiti's leaders and government, and ignored the needs of the majority. And the USA proceeded to reinforce the already harrowing gap between the rich and the poor. These three tendencies are not only connected but mutually reinforcing. These tendencies will continue to govern the reconstruction effort unless determined political action is taken to counteract them.⁹

Haiti has been robbed of its food, money and popular government. The 'looters' come from the colonial West that has never wanted a free Haiti, whose **history consists of** subjugation, revolution and further subjugation. The USA and France have profited from the 'three-cornered trade in sugar, manufactured goods and slaves' themselves. In the name of free trade, US neo-liberal policies ruined Haitian agriculture when forced to lower its own tariffs that protected its rice growers. US subsidised rice flooded the market forcing mass migration of small farmers to Port au Prince, further adding to the overcrowded slums which made the earthquake so much more devastating.¹⁰ The 'looters' are still coming from outside Haiti's fragile borders.

What can be done?

Haiti – exploited and broken - above all needs allies and a bailout.¹¹

Cancel the debts:

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has recognised Venezuela's historical debt to Haiti for providing assistance to Simón Bolívar, who led Venezuela's war of independence. He has canceled Haiti's \$295 million debt to Petrocaribe, Venezuela's energy regional energy distributor. There is a growing movement to cancel Haiti's foreign debt as a way to return to the Haitian people the authority to rebuild their lives and their country. Among these are the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good¹² and Jubilee USA.^{13 14} A petition of 150,000 signatures has been sent to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)

calling for the cancellation of Haiti's \$165 million debt repayment obligation for debt cancellation to the World Economic Summit meeting in Davos.

Support food producers:

There are many worthwhile suggestions that respond to the problems rather than neoliberal economic recipes. This can be achieved by increasing their access to:

- land, by supporting a comprehensive land-reform program designed to transfer quality, arable land to small farmers;
- appropriate technology and training;
- infrastructure improvements, particularly irrigation and roads;
- soil restoration and reforestation programs to improve soil fertility;
- food storage and marketing support.¹⁵

Allow Haitians to order their affairs:

There have been calls to allow Aristide to return to Haiti and that the ban on his Fanmi Lavalas party be lifted. Haiti needs to be rid of the U.S. and U.N. military occupation that has once again snuck into their country and to cut dependency ties with Washington, the European Union, and others. 'People-to-people solidarity' where the people themselves can help in the reconstruction rather than foreign domination. Desperate Haitians do not need US military or UN 'peacekeepers' pointing guns at them. On the way to ordering their own affairs, we should demand that France start repaying the \$21 billion it extorted from Haiti in 1825, to 'compensate' for loss of Haiti as a slave colony.¹⁶ It would seem that Haiti could do with a trade policy that develops, rather than undermines, labour rights, environmental standards, and food sovereignty. Government policy would need to privilege human need for all over profit for the few. It is important that a space be created for women's full participation and power.

If you shared my pain you would not continue to make me suffer, to torture me, to deny me my dignity and my rights, especially my rights to self-determination and self-expression¹⁷

Haiti does not need more guns and weapons. It needs help in order to rebuild and be enabled to have genuine independence. Till now its history is a 'historical disaster'.¹⁸ International interventions must break with past patterns to avoid the ongoing historical disaster and end the misery due to a history of irresponsible aid policies.¹⁹ The earthquake aid response cannot be hampered by a country such as the USA which has never wanted or accepted Haitian self-rule – something that is again evident as so-called 'security concerns' were prioritised over urgent, life-and-death needs.



- ¹ Robert C. Koehler, Haiti: The Spectacle, *CommonDreams.org*, January 21, 2010
- ² Joan Chittister, Haiti: The rest of the story is ours, *National Catholic Reporter*, January 25, 2010.
- ³ *ibid*
- ⁴ *ibid*
- ⁵ Koehler, *op.cit.*
- ⁶ Barbara Rhine, Keep What You Have, But Leave the Rest, *CounterPunch*, February 4, 2010.
- ⁷ Sarah van Gelder, Cancel Haiti's Debt, *YES! Magazine* January 28, 2010. US,
- ⁸ Beverly Bell, Fighting Like Hell, *CommonDreams.org* February 11, 2010
- ⁹ Peter Hallward, The Fourth Invasion: Securing Disaster in Haiti, *CounterPunch*, January 28, 2010
- ¹⁰ Rhine, *op.cit.*
- ¹¹ Gary Younge, Exploited and broken, Haiti needs a bailout, *The Guardian*, February 3, 2010.
- ¹² (www.newevangelicalpartnership.org)
- ¹³ (www.jubileusa.org/haiti/haitiaction/whitehouseaction.html)
- ¹⁴ van Gelder, *op.cit.*
- ¹⁵ .cf. Grassroots International study *Feeding Dependency, Starving Democracy: USAID Policies in Haiti*.
- ¹⁶ Raj Patel, Haiti: Horsemen and Hoarse Women, *Raj Patel Blog* January 17, 2010.
- ¹⁷ John Maxwell, No, Mister, You Can't Share My Pain, *CounterPunch*, January 19, 2010
- ¹⁸ Linda Polman, Fear of the poor is hampering Haiti rescue, *The Times* January 18, 2010.
- ¹⁹ Monika Kalra Varma and Kerry Kennedy, Guiding Haiti's Roadmap to Recovery With Human Rights, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, February 2, 2010.

Haiti: A Brief History

These brief facts are a history of a truly resilient people, who fought off slavery and survived civil wars, countless massacres and truly oppressive leadership. The Haitians proclaimed themselves the first black republic in the world in 1804, and have remained independent to this day.

- **December 5, 1492:** Columbus 'discovers' (sic) Haiti (the island of Hispaniola)
- **1697:** The Spaniards cede the western third of Hispaniola to the French crown at the Treaty of Ryswick. Haiti is now called 'Saint Domingue'.
- **1697-1791:** Saint Domingue becomes the richest colony in the world. Its capital, Cap Français, is known as the Paris of the New World. It is also a regime of extraordinary cruelty; the 500,000 slaves taken by the French are flogged, starved, and buried alive for minor offenses.
- **August 1791:** the first major black rebellion takes place, initiated by Boukman, a voodoo *houngan*. This begins the markings of civil war between the black dominated north and the mulatto dominated south.
- **1796:** Toussaint L'Ouverture, an educated herb doctor and military man, emerges as the leader of the former slaves in the north. He restored order, ended the massacres, and restored some of Saint Domingue's former prosperity.
- **1801:** Napoleon Bonaparte despatches an army of 34,000 to try to subdue the slave armies and retake the colony for France; this mission was unsuccessful. The leader of the army Leclerc ultimately had Toussaint L'Ouverture seized and deported to France. He died within a year.



- **May 1802:** Convention in Paris reintroduces slavery, which brings on more rebellions and massacres.
- **January 1804:** Jean Jacques Dessalines proclaimed the independent black Republic of Haiti in the northern half of the island. Dessalines was unpopular with the mulattoes and was assassinated in 1806. His death led to civil war again between the south (under General Petion) and the north (under Henry Christophe).
- **1820:** Henry Christophe commits suicide by shooting himself with a silver bullet; he had been a tyrannical ruler, crowning himself 'king', and building a palace and citadel (at Cap Haitien in the north) at great cost to Haitian lives. At his death Haiti was taken over by General Boyer, and civil war ceased. Boyer obtained official Haitian independence from France at the price of 150 million French francs.
- **1843 to 1915:** Haiti sees 22 heads of state, most of whom leave office by violent means. Rivalry continues among the whites, the mulatto elite, and the blacks. **1915:** President Guillaume Sam is dismembered and the Americans invade the country. They remain for 19 years. Despite improvements made to the infrastructure by the Americans, the Haitians opposed their presence.
- **1934:** The Americans leave Haiti, which is now prospering once again.
- **1957:** François Duvalier, a doctor and union leader, was elected president. Duvalier, also known as 'Papa Doc', terrorised the country, rooting out any and all opponents to his administration. He was a practising vodunist, his *loa* being *Baron Samedi*, the guardian of cemeteries and a harbinger of death. He ensured his power through his private militia, the *tontons macoutes* (which means in kreyol, 'uncle boogeyman').
- **1964:** Duvalier changes the constitution so that he can be elected president for life.
- **1971:** François Duvalier dies and is succeeded by his son Jean Claude, age 19 (also known as 'Baby Doc'). By this time Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere (and remains so to this day).
- **February 1986:** The Duvalier regime collapses under *Operation Deschoukay* and Baby Doc flees to France.
- **December 1990:** Jean-Bertrand Aristide (a religious priest) is elected in a landslide victory.
- **September 1991:** Military coup deposes Aristide's government; Organization of American states imposes an embargo lasting three years.
- **October 1994:** Aristide returns to Haiti to serve out his term of office, facilitated by the US military and UN troops.
- **December, 1995:** René Préval elected in a landslide victory [representing Aristide's Lavalas party];

Source: *The Caribbean and the Bahamas* James Henderson, Cadogan Books, London, 1997

Compiled by Anne E. Shroeder, Language Works, EMail: anne@language-works.com

- **May 2006:** René Préval re-elected for the Fwon Lespwa party in an election with low level of participation and boycotted by the Lavalas party;
- **Aug-Oct 2008:** Haiti devastated by the effects of four major hurricanes – worst effects in and around northern city of Gonaives;
- **12 January 2010:** Major earthquake close to the capital, Port-au-Prince destroys much of the city and kills an estimated 250,000. Major US militarisation of the nation as part of the "relief-response".
- **February 2010:** Legislative Assembly elections suspended
- **October 2010:** Presidential elections due to be held – with hand-over of power due to occur in 2011 on the tradition inauguration date of 7th February.

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