

Stop the military occupation of Haiti!

Haiti: A scar in the face of America

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Deye Mon, gen Mon

(After the mountains, come more mountains -Haitian Proverb)

Haiti is a small country (28,000 sq. Kms), that shares the western part of the same island with the Dominican Republic. 8 million human beings live there in desperately poor conditions, dwelling in overcrowded shanty towns, that don't meet the basic standards to fulfill the most essential human needs:

- just 46% of the population have access to safe water
- leatrines are a luxurious item in most houses in the poor areas of the biggest cities (Port Au Prince, Gonaive, Cap Haitien),
- AIDS rates are rampant (6%, actually, the highest in America) and are a sad legacy of the US sex tourism of the 70s and 80s,
- only half of the population know how to read or write,
- and if you are lucky, you will be able to live longer than 50 years ... Most people don't make it (just 3,7% reach 65 years old).

And now times are getting even tougher, as the population is again brutalised by a de facto government, in office since March 2004, that has already claimed the lives of several Haitians (some figures claim around 10,000 people has died as a result of political violence and repression in just one year). And nature hasn't been anymore compassionate with Haitian people than its government. Last year, hurricane Jeanne and the consecutive floods, claimed the lives of some 2,000 people.

But, despite everything, hope springs out in Haiti just where the blood merges with the mud and the tears of its people. And that hope takes its inspiration from its own history, for the history of Haiti is intimately linked to the history of the struggle against oppression and slavery, in its oldest forms, as well as on its newest forms. Few countries, probably, have had the importance of that small half of an island. Haiti, more than an actual country, has represented for centuries, a symbol: it is the first nation in Latin America to become independent and it helped its brethren in the south to get rid of the Spanish yoke early in the XIXth century; It is the first black republic in the world; and it is the first country to effectively abolish slavery. For all its current sorrows, the greatness of its people is the sole guarantee of better days to come.

Brief history of Haiti

The history of Haiti, well reflected by the wise proverb at the start, is a tragedy that spans 500 years, and it is by far, the country that has been worst punished by Colonialism and by the legacy of its aftermath: "discovered" in 1492 by Columbus, the island, that was called Hispaniola, had, in a census carried out in 1493, around 3 millions of native inhabitants, the Tainos. By the year 1519, all of them had disappeared from the face of Earth, victims of the exploitation of gold for the Spanish. Most of them died of over-work, others were murdered, others killed themselves in desperation and committed infanticide to avoid their children suffering from their same fate.

Ten years after the Spanish settling, however, the local labour (which was increasingly getting scarce), starts being supplemented by the massive importation of slaves from Africa. The poor slaves didn't have a better life: the mortality rate was over the roof, and the casualties were quickly replaced by "fresh flesh" from Congo or Guinea. By 1520 the gold exploitation ceases, and plantations become Haiti's big business: the first exports of sugar had already happened in 1516. But Spain soon lost interest in the island, attracted by the wealth of Mexico and Peru, leaving it as a land for cattle to roam and pasture by the late XVIth century.

In the mid-XVIIth century, the French start to settle in the western side of la Hispaniola, and the Spanish cede that portion of the island to them in 1697. From then on, the French intensified the slave traffick and the plantations, turning it into a great producer of tobacco, coffee, sugar and cotton. It soon acquired the nickname "the pearl of the Antilles", as the production of its slaves made it the most profitable colony at the time in the world.

In the 1790s, however, slave riots erupt in the whole country, like a boiling vulcano that has, for long, standed an unbearable pain. No partial reform can quell the rebellion lead by Touissant L'Overture and Jean Jacques Dessalines: not even the formal abolition of slavery in 1794. The slaves want their masters out of the island for good, and fight hard the US, French, Spanish and British armies that came to support the French settlers. And in 1804 they drove them out, giving birth painfully to the first black republic of the world.

All of the world was shocked and horrified: It was a "dreadful" example for slaves everywhere. No country gave Haiti formal recognition until much later. USA wouldn't recognise it until 1862, under the excuse that black ambassadors would be a bad example for the local slaves, and France only recognised it in 1825, after Haiti, strangled by an economic blockade, had to accept paying for the estimation France had made of their "losses" with Haiti's independence: the estimatie was made in a calculation of how much the French had stopped profiting, and for the "price" of all the slaves that had been freed ... civilised manners demand payment for the loss of "property". The debt Haiti had to pay was originally 150 millions of francs, 44 times the national budget of Haiti at the time. They got into a debt that will last for 100 years with French bankers, and no matter that the debt was further adjusted to 90 million, by the end of the XIX century, this debt absorbed 80% of the national income. It is in this that we find the main reason of Haiti's appalling poverty. The debt was only cancelled in 1947.

In the shade of this debt and the restrictions on trade, a tiny elite strove to monopolise power with an iron hand. Internal disputes of that elite pave the way for the 1915 military intervention of the USA on Haiti, that will cost the lives of 15.000 Haitians, and will leave a painful legacy of economic and political interventionism. The intervention, had, as a main goal, to reform the land laws of Haiti, allowing the appropriation of it by foreign investors, taking away (most of the times with the help of the marines) the land from the poor peasants, and giving it to the plantations of private US companies. For this purpose, they drafted a Constitution that was approved by less than 5% of the population (the marines dissolved the National Assembly — Parliament — in 1917, after they didn't ratify it), that protected above the rights of the locals, the right of private and foreign investors in regard to the resources and wealth of the country — it allowed, for instance, the full repatriation of profits. They introduced forced labour in the platations, what sparked the Cacos rebellion. They formed the Haitian military forces, one of the most backwarded armies in the world, notorious for their brutality, whose sole victory has been against Haitian people themselves. The army has been one of the pillars of political domination by the Haitian elites,

and for their allies in Washington. They stayed in the country until 1934, but when they left, they made sure that their friends remained holding really tightly the strings of power.

Papa Doc to Aristide

One of the most notorious dictators that came later into scene, was Francoise Duvalier, “Papa Doc”, who became president for life, ruling the country from 1957 to 1971. His regime claimed the lives of 60.000 Haitians, but was considered by the USA as a “democratic” friend, for his opposition to Castro’s regime in Cuba. He used his knowledge of voodoo to terrorise the population, dressing as the spirit of death, Baron Samedi, and forming a paramilitary group, the Tontons Macoutes, wizards that made people “disappear” (both in the myth and in reality). Macoutes has become all over the world a byword of torture and brutality.

His son, Jean Claude Duvalier, “Baby Doc”, come to power after his death, and his ascension to power, matches the change of emphasis of US investment in Haiti from plantations, to garment factories. Plantations lost their attraction as centuries of intensive plantation were taking its toll over the face of Haiti, which is suffering from a serious erosion problem. The garment factories flourished from the 70s until the mid-90s, increasing the levels of impoverishment of an already impoverished population; as the factories were set to satisfy an external demand, they didn’t improved salaries in order to “create” a local market to absorb production. Recently, however, as many factories are closing, unemployment is making prey of Haiti’s urban centres. In the political field, under Baby Doc, brutality kept going on, as usual ...

Until the people decided, once again, that they had enough. That happened in 1986, when Duvalier, was forced into exile by an angry country, being well received in France, where he enjoys the protection of his international friends that profited during their reign of terror. A number of generals alternated in power, until a charismatic Salesian priest made his appearance on the scene: his name was Jean Bertrand Aristide. But the people called him, with love, Titid — the little one in Kreyole, the language of Haiti. His sermons talked about love, organisation, about the right to rebel against injustice, about unity and about hope.

The members of the Catholic communities that followed him, were persecuted and killed. But nothing could stop him winning the elections in December 1990, with 67% of the votes. But his anti-duvalierism was at odds with the allegiance of most of the tiny but powerful Haitian oligarchy towards the deposed dictator. He increased the minimum wage and started a number of reforms to privilege social investment in education and health. But the USA distrusted him, and the local elites disliked him too much to let him finish his period, and a coup d’etat, sent him into exile on September 1991, just after being seven months in office. The new dictator Raoul Cedras, applied the traditional repression well known to Haitian people: until 1994, when an agreement between the USA, the Haitian elite and Aristide finished his rule, it had claimed the lives of 5,000 Haitians. The agreement contemplated amnesty to the regime for its violations of Human Rights, implementation of neoliberal policies and that Aristide will accept the original end of presidential period as not affected by all the years he spent in exile. That meant that by early 1995, he couldn’t be president no longer, and couldn’t be re-elected.

A close associate of Aristide, Rene Preval, wins the elections and becomes president from 1995 to 2000. And that year, Aristide wins again the elections. During that time, they made some

reforms on the educational ground, that improved notably the literacy rates in that country, but faced very harsh times as the garment factories were leaving the country, and as the IMF was pressuring the small country to apply its structural adjustment policies, these meant, basically, privatizing and auctioning the National area of the economy, and liberalising the introductions of imports; in a couple of years, US subsidised rice wiped the Haitian rice from the local markets, and now the country, that once was self-sufficient in rice, gets it all from the USA.

But they weren't willing to go to the step the IMF was asking, which gained further animosity from the "international community" to the populist movement lead by Aristide, Lavalas. And the traditional elites started resumed their campaign to oust Aristide from office and to gain power for themselves alone. They started denouncing, under the umbrella group, the G-184, government corruption: there was indeed corruption, but nothing compared to the "official piracy" of any other Haitian government.

They denounced that legislative elections in June 2000 as rigged: but the only thing that was criticised by international observers was the method of counting, that included only the four favorite candidates in 8 disputed seats, affecting the percentages, but not the number of votes. They criticised that the government promoted violence: there was indeed gang violence, from both sides, and some of that was carried out by supporters of Aristide, but there was no proven State enforcement of violence through government institutions like that which had occurred under the Cedras or Duvalier dictatorship. They denounced a number of political prisoners: that was never proved, and only some ex-army officers unprotected from the amnesty laws remained in jail for their violations of Human Rights. They denounced "massacres" during his government: but from 2000 to 2003, some 30 people died for political reasons, a far cry from the 5,000 victims of Cedras, and half of them were supporters of the government. All that violence was linked to ex-army members and to gang fighting (one of the organisations that denounced most of the "violations of Human Rights" in Haiti, CARLI, today regret doing so, and said they had to exaggerate the facts under pressure from the Republican based US organisation National Endowment for Democracy).

The international press also echoed those fake concerns on the Human Rights records of Aristide, the French press, probably being, the one that went furthest, *Liberation* denounced the "carnival of death and torture" of Aristide. All that with the explicit purpose of helping the internal opposition of the elites. It is worth mentioning that the same press has remained silent about the current carnival of death and torture in Haiti... it seems that as long as death strikes the poor, no one really seems to care. The most shocking hard figure of how fake "humanitarian concerns" were exploited with a political agenda, is the situation of asylum seekers: of more than 24,000 Haitians intercepted on boats trying to reach USA shores from 1980 to 1990, only 11 received asylum status as victims of political persecution, compared to 75,000 out of 75,000 Cubans (the last ones, obviously, are used as a propaganda factor). But in the 7 months on Aristide in office in 1991, as the numbers of people fleeing were dramatically reduced, the USA granted asylum to 20 people, double as they gave in 10 years of Duvalier and post-Duvalier terror.

The Aristide government was far from being perfect, but couldn't be compared to any other regime that had been tolerated by the international community in that country. As well he is still the most popular political figure in that country. Haiti was strangled by an oppressive economic situation, and claiming electoral scandals, the USA managed to block all sort of economic support to Haiti since 2002. France hardens its hand over Haiti as well, after Aristide was bold enough to claim that France should pay back the money Haiti paid them as a price for their inde-

pendence (they calculate it in 22 billions euros). Pressured internally by the G-184, he had to face armed attacks from the Dominican border by the ex-army, leaded by the thug Guy Phillippe, who launched a large scale offensive in February 2004, that finishes with the toppling, once again, of Aristide, just after the 200th anniversary of their independence.

Aristide is now a refugee in South Africa, and the people in Haiti are back to the old routine of brutalisation: today, there are around 1.000 political prisoners, 10.000 people are estimated to have died by political violence and repression. The UN nominated in June 2004 a peace keeping mission (MINUSTAH), supposed to reinforce democratic institutions in Haiti. That force is, though, composed of countries with dirty records when it comes to Human Rights: Angola, Pakistan, Nepal, Chile, Argentina and Brazil. Not much understanding of human rights and democracy can be expected from that bunch. Sadly, the reports of Human Rights observers all prove that the UN mission in Haiti is, at best, indifferent to Human Rights violations, and, at worse, accomplice of it – this is good to bear in mind for those who advocate a more active role of UN peacekeeping forces globally in opposition to US militarism.

This MINUSTAH is lead by Brazil and it seems that the sacrifice of Haitian people is the price president Lula is paying for a permanent seat in the Security Council of United Nations. This leading role in the arbitrary and bloody occupation of Haiti is directed to show Brazil as a regional leader and as a reliable force for the international community. The Chilean presence in the occupation has been as bad as the Brazilian one; the subservience of the ruling class of Chile to the USA anyway, leaves very little margin for surprises, but worryingly this is the first time that Chilean forces have been openly used as a mercenary army for the USA in another Latin American country. We have to oppose with all of our strength that this is repeated again.

Many Human Rights reports are denouncing the brutality of the Haitian police, and how they are assisted by MINUSTAH in their repressive raids to the popular shanty towns. There are elections planned for October and November, and with those elections, they are trying to legitimatise the coup in the face of the world, and to exclude Lavalas from power. The Haitian oligarchy is not willing to allow the minimum share of power with the riff raff.

And the world seems to keep turning indifferent to the big sorrow of Haitian people. But there is light at the end of the tunnel: the resistance to the occupation grows stronger with each passing day. The Haitian working class are taking to the streets in every slum across the island to demand the end of this nightmare and to declare their will to start building a new Haiti. They have a long tradition of direct action, what they call the practices of Kraze Brise, Dechoukaj and Raché Manyok all terms that indicate the need to pull out the problems from the roots, and to clear the field before implementing new practices and solutions. Those practices should become the germs of a new society and should be taken to a strategical perspective, beyond the limits imposed by the participation in the formal bourgeois institutions, that has historically been the trap which revolutionaries get tangled up in.

We all know that the fate of Haiti is up to the Haitians themselves. But they need our help, and we need as many people as possible to demonstrate against the occupation to let them know that they are not alone and that no struggle in the world occurs without solidarity. As another Haitian proverb says *“Men Ampil, Chay Pa Lou”* (*Many hand make the burden not so heavy*). They need friendly hands, hands that will help them to complete the heroic struggle they started 200 years ago for an independent life.

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Not much has been written about the continuing occupation of Haiti despite claims that around 10,000 people have died as a result of political violence and repression in just one year. This article by a Chilean anarchist summarises the history of the island and the events of recent years. The article is a brief summary of two articles previously published in Spanish, “Haiti: la cara sucia de las razones humanitarias” (OSL editions, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2004) and “Ayiti, una cicatriz en el rostro de América Latina” (both documents are available on Anarkismo.net). The full references are published in the mentioned articles and the interested reader can consult them online. The article has been edited for this Anarkismo.net feature to improve readability

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