

President Sarkozy's visit to Haiti

Norman Girvan

Nicholas Sarkozy's visit to Haiti on February 17, 2010 was the first ever made by a French President to that country. Here is a (a) comment invited by AP ahead of the visit, (b) an additional comment prepared after this visit, and (c) the AP Report on the visit.

"President Sarkozy would do France--yes France--a great service if he were to acknowledge the role of French Republic in Haiti's present plight, by imposing a cruel indemnity on the Haitian people in 1825 for the crime of having believed that the glorious ideals of the French Revolution of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, applied to all members of the human fraternity, regardless of the colour of their skin; and for having acted on that belief by fighting for, and gaining, the right to be free.

"The indemnity imposed by France condemned the Haitian people to a cycle of indebtedness, environmental degradation and underdevelopment from which they have yet to recover; and if President Sarkozy were to make restitution, in the name of all the decent people of the French Republic, for this historic wrong; and support the efforts of the Haitian people to rebuild their shattered lives and their economy with the resources thereby provided; he would undoubtedly gain the respect of the entire world, and be a prime candidate for the award of the Nobel Peace Prize for 2010 ."

RESTITUTION AND RELIEF: THE NUMBERS IN CONTEXT (21/02/2010)

- **S\$21.9 billion: the 2004 estimate of France's Restitution Debt to Haiti.** (France's Restitution Debt to Haiti set at \$21 billion J. Damu)
- **US\$.13.9 billion: latest IDB estimate of the probable limit of the economic cost of the earthquake to Haiti. This is twice Haiti's annual GDP and 63 percent of the Restitution Debt.** (Damage from Haiti's earthquake could reach \$14 billion AP)
- **\$1.5 Billion: amount of UN is appeal for immediate assistance to earthquake victims; of which \$637 million pledged up to 18 February.** (UN in record appeal for Haiti aid, **Aljazeera**)
- **US\$367 million (EU 270 million) amount of French relief aid to Haiti announced by Sarkozy during his visit on 17 February 2010. This includes a write-off of Haiti's bilateral debt to France of Eu. 56 million.** (Sarkozy promises Eu. 270 M. for Haiti BBC).
- **The amount promised by Sarkozy is therefore 24 percent of the UN appeal, less than 3 percent of the economic cost of the earthquake; and less than 2 percent of the Restitution Debt**
- ***The Restitution Debt is also equivalent to about three times Haiti's pre-earthquake annual GDP; about one and a half times the probable economic cost of the earthquake, which the IADB says is "the most destructive (natural disaster) a country has ever experienced when measured in terms of the number of people killed as a share of the country's population" (IADB); and about 60 times the amount promised by Sarkozy.***

Sarcozy's visit revives bitter memories

By Michelle Faul (AP)

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/16/AR2010021601234.html>

¶ PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Nicolas Sarkozy's visit Wednesday, the first ever by a French president, is reviving bitter memories of the crippling costs of Haiti's 1804 independence.

¶ A third of the population was killed in an uprising against exceptionally brutal slavery, an international embargo was imposed to prevent slave revolts elsewhere and 90 million pieces of gold were demanded by Paris from the world's first black republic.

¶ The debt hobbled Haiti, it seemed for life.

¶ A country plagued by natural and unnatural calamities of Biblical proportions was desperately poor and mismanaged even before a magnitude-7 earthquake smashed up Port-au-Prince, killing more than 200,000 people and leaving more than a million homeless.

¶ Haitian politicians this week diplomatically skirted the question of reparations — a demand put to Paris by ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004. That suggests Sarkozy's four-hour visit could herald a new era.

¶ Some are welcoming France's new interest in what was its richest colony as a counterbalance to the United States, which occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and has sent troops three times in the past 16 years.

¶ French officials say Sarkozy will announce details of "a French plan for the reconstruction of Haiti" — if Haitian officials agree. It differs little from proposals from Haitian, U.S. and U.N. officials to decentralize power away from the devastated capital and boost agriculture and tourism.

¶ The trip brings Sarkozy to an island where, French officials acknowledge, fascination with things French duels with strong, lingering resentments.

¶ One official close to the French presidency, briefing reporters in Paris on condition of **anonymity**, hinted that France is not deaf to calls for reparations, calling Sarkozy's visit "an occasion to show that France is mobilizing to give Haitians control of their destiny and pay past debts."

¶ For Millien Romage, a legislator for Aristide's party when reparations were demanded, "This is not a time to be making loud demands. We don't want to fight. But perhaps the French could recognize their debt by helping us to get out of poverty. They can help build roads, houses, schools."

¶ Sarkozy himself has said the catastrophe, following so many others, offers "a chance to get Haiti once and for all out of the curse it seems to have been stuck with for such a long time."

¶ Some Haitians would say they were cursed by their French colonizers.

¶ "The indemnity imposed by France condemned the Haitian people to a cycle of indebtedness, environmental degradation and underdevelopment from which they have yet to recover," said Norman Girvan, a professor at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad. "President Sarkozy would do France _ yes France _ a great service if he were to acknowledge the role of the French Republic in Haiti's present plight."

¶ France has already said it was canceling all of Haiti's 56 **million** euro (US\$77 **million**) debt to Paris.

¶ In 1825, crippled by the U.S.-led international embargo that was enforced by French warships, Haiti agreed to pay France 150 **million** francs in compensation for the lost "property" _ including slaves _ of French plantation owners.

¶ By comparison, France sold the United States its immensely larger Louisiana Territory in 1803 for just 60 **million** francs. The amount for Haiti was later lowered to 90 **million** gold francs.

¶ Haiti did not finish paying the debilitating debt _ which was swollen by massive interest payments to French and American banks _ until 1947.

¶ But Haiti's wealth already was destroyed. It had been the world's richest colony, providing half the globe's sugar and other exports including coffee, cotton, hardwood and indigo that exceeded the value of everything produced in the United States in 1788.

¶ By the early 1780s, half of Haiti's forests were gone, leading to the devastating erosion and extreme poverty that bedevils the country today.

¶ France's other former colonies in the region _ Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Martin, St. Barts and Guiana (in South America) _ all have voted to remain part of France and send legislators to the French parliament.

¶ The human cost of the colonial exploitation in Haiti was staggering. Slaves lasted little more than 10 years under brutal conditions. Haitian slaves who displeased their masters were boiled to death in vats of molasses, buried alive in piles of biting insects, crushed by heavy stones or simply starved to death. Just before the rebellion, Haiti had some 450,000 slaves, 25,000 whites and several thousand freed blacks and a mixed-race elite.

¶ The uprising was as brutal as what had gone before.

¶ Haitians asked about their independence today quickly recall the bloody Creole slogan "koupe tet, boule kay" _ cut off their heads, torch their houses.

¶ Freed Haitians continued to be brutalized by a succession of military and civilian dictatorships and increasingly corrupt officials. Most recently, much of officialdom is accused of being in league with drug traffickers who have made Haiti a major transshipment point between South America and the United States and Europe.

¶ Homeless Haitians who had not heard of Sarkozy's visit said they would welcome help, wherever it comes from.

¶ "I hope he can bring me a tent, and the food, medicine and houses that everybody needs," said 19-year-old Joint Dewendsca, who expects to give birth to her first child under a tent made

of bed sheets and wood poles on the grounds of Quisqueya University.

¶ Many remain wary, however, in a country where people still describe a deceitful politician as "speaking French." The vast majority of Haitians speak Creole.

¶ "France still has its eye on Haiti," said Evens Dangervil, 31. "It might want to control us politically and economically."

¶ Michel Georges, a historian, hopes France does have its eye on Haiti _ as a natural partner for much-needed investment. He complains that France has bigger investments in the Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti.

¶ The time has come, said the Roman Catholic Rev. Joseph Desire, for Haiti and France to turn the page on a bitter past.

¶ "The French never forgave us for winning our independence. We were the granary of Europe and we broke the hegemony of the French," he said at Our Lady of Charity, among the few Port-au-Prince churches unharmed by the quake.

¶ "But now we need help. We must rebuild this country and we hope the French are ready to help us."

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¶ Associated Press Writers Elaine Ganley in Paris and Evens Sanon in Port-au-Prince contributed to this report.