

SOLIDARITY WITH HAITI

Norman Girvan

IIR/UWI Panel Discussion on Haiti 26 January 2010

Much of the discourse on Haiti since (and before) the earthquake of January 12 has been ahistorical and decontextualised. I cringe every time I hear that Haiti is “the poorest country in the Western hemisphere” that is “plagued with corrupt and tyrannical governments” and other stereotypes so beloved by the Western media; sometimes reproduced uncritically by our own media houses. These phrases, repeated *ad nauseam* are meant to instill and internalize a view in which the Haitian people are uniquely responsible for their own poverty and poor infrastructure. They carry a subliminal message which in turn is employed as a political weapon. Haiti; the first and only self-liberated colony of enslaved persons of African descent in the American hemisphere, is proof of the inherent incapacity of black people to run their own affairs without the extended tutorship of the white world; and of the folly, not to say the futility, of defiance of an imperial order. That heroic defiance was of course symbolized by the victory of Toussaint’s forces against the armies of Napoleon and the unilateral independence of January 1, 1804; immortalized in C.L.R. James’s classic *The Black Jacobins*.

Professor Sir Hilary Beckles, the distinguished Caribbean historian and Pro Chancellor of this university, has done much to set the record straight in short but brilliant article called “[Haiti: The Hate and the Quake](#)”.

Buried beneath the rubble of imperial propaganda, out of both Western Europe and the United States, is the evidence which shows that Haiti's independence was defeated by an aggressive North-Atlantic alliance that could not imagine their world inhabited by a free regime of Africans as representatives of the newly emerging democracy.

The French refused to recognise Haiti's independence. (With the support of the Americans and the British), they declared it an illegal pariah state. ...

Haiti was isolated at birth - ostracised and denied access to world trade, finance, and institutional development. It was the most vicious example of national strangulation recorded in modern history....

In 1825; with the economy bankrupt; the political leadership isolated... the country had to find a way to be inserted back into the world economy. As the price of this insertion, the French government demanded, and the Government agreed to pay, compensation and reparation amounting to 150 million gold francs. Even members of the Cabinet were valued because they had been enslaved people before independence.

Thus began the systematic destruction of the Republic of Haiti. The French government bled the nation and rendered it a failed state. It was a merciless exploitation that was designed and guaranteed to collapse the Haitian economy and society.

Haiti was forced to pay this sum until 1922 when the last instalment was made. During the long 19th century, the payment to France amounted to up to 70 per cent of the country's foreign exchange earnings.

When the Americans invaded the country in the early 20th century, one of the reasons offered was to assist the French in collecting its reparations.

The collapse of the Haitian nation resides at the feet of France and America, especially. These two nations betrayed, failed, and destroyed the dream that was Haiti; crushed to dust in an effort to destroy the flower of freedom and the seed of justice.

Haiti did not fail. It was destroyed by two of the most powerful nations on earth, both of which continue to have a primary interest in its current condition.

What we in the rest of the Caribbean should understand, therefore, is that Haiti is in all of us. The desire for freedom that drove the heroic acts of the Haitian revolutionaries was always present in the enslaved and semi-enslaved populations in the rest of the region. And Haiti was punished in order to teach the rest of us a lesson. That is the historic debt that we owe to the Haitian people. And it was the constant fear of 'another Haiti' that eventually helped to convince the white power structure that maintaining the regime of chattel slavery simply wasn't worth the cost. We all owe our freedom in part to the Haitian people.

We can pick up the story where Beckles left off, with the dictatorships of 'Papa Doc' Duvalier and his son 'Baby Doc', whose grotesque excesses of persecution of their opponents, like those of Trujillo, Batista and many others, were conveniently overlooked by Washington as long as they invoked the mantras of anti-communism and allowed US business free rein in their country. As an American President is reputed to have said about one of these dictators, "he may be a son of bitch, but he's our son of a bitch" (FDR about Somoza, reputedly).

The election of the radical priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1990 was accompanied by euphoria among the ordinary people of Haiti who had long suffered the depredations of foreign intervention combined with exploitation by domestic elites of either mulatto, black or Middle Eastern origin. Their hope was that the Haitian state would be, at last, put in the service of the Haitian people. Within nine months of taking power in 1991, however, Aristide had been deposed by the local army with the support of these elites and the connivance and collusion of the US administration. This ushered in a period of persecution of his party and of the democratic and progressive forces that supported him.

By the time Aristide was restored by power by another US military intervention in 1994, in the hope that he would 'stabilize' the political situation—and of course, help to stem the flow of Haitian boat people to the US, from which they are automatically returned, in stark contrast to the welcomes extended to Cuban boat people-- by this time Aristide had apparently made his peace with Washington; as during his second presidency in 2000-2004 he continued the policies of market opening, tariff liberalisation, and privatization of public enterprises and public services started by his predecessor, Rene Preval, to the detriment of industrial and especially agricultural development and rural development generally. In the words Dr Alex Dupuy, Distinguished Professor of sociology at Wesleyan University in the US, and himself a Haitian

Long before the powerful 7.0 magnitude earthquake (and several aftershocks) struck Haiti on January 12 and leveled the metropolitan capital city of Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas, that city was already a disaster waiting to happen. With a population of more than 2 million in a city whose

infrastructure could at best sustain a population of 100,000, the local and national public administrations simply abandoned the city to itself. Neither provided meaningful services of any kind—schools, healthcare, electricity, potable water, sanitation, zoning and construction regulations—and what they did provide was poorly administered, or primarily served the needs of the wealthier or better off sectors of the population who could afford to pay for them. Consider, for example, that only about 28 percent of Haitians have access to health care, 50 percent have access to potable water, and 10 percent have electrical services. In short, the Haitian state—i.e., the government—long ago abdicated its responsibilities to the majority of Haitian citizens, and at least since the Duvalier era, deferred to bilateral and multilateral aid donors, non-governmental agencies (NGOs) to provide services to the population....

He goes on to say:

There is no doubt that the dominant economic and political classes of Haiti bear great responsibility for the abysmal conditions in the country that exacerbated the impact of the earthquake (or of hurricanes or tropical storms). However, these local actors did not create these conditions alone but did so in close partnership with foreign governments and economic actors with long-standing interests in Haiti, principally those of the advanced countries—the United States, Canada, and France—and their international financial institutions (IFIs)—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank. Since the 1970s and under various free market mantras, these international actors and institutions sought to and succeeded in transforming Haiti into a supplier of the cheapest labor in this hemisphere for foreign and domestic investors in the export assembly industry; in dismantling all obstacles to free trade; in privatizing public enterprises; and in weakening further the institutions of the state through policies that reinforced Haiti's dependence on foreign aid organizations—governmental and non-governmental.

These policies had drastic consequences for the Haitian economy. Locating the assembly industries primarily in Port-au-Prince encouraged migration from the rural areas to the capital city, contributed to its bloated population and sprawling squalor, and provided a never ending supply of cheap labor for those industries. At the same time, removing tariffs on food imports were detrimental to Haitian agriculture. Whereas in the 1970s Haiti produced most of the rice it consumed and imported only 10 percent of its food needs, by the end of the 1990s it was importing more than 42 percent of its food needs, had become the highest per capita consumer of subsidized US imported rice in the Western Hemisphere, and the largest importer of foodstuffs from the US in the Caribbean. Thus, US farmers benefitted at the expense of Haitian producers. These policies, too, propelled rural-to-urban migration, with Port-au-Prince as the primary destination, as well as emigration to the neighboring Dominican Republic, the Caribbean, and North America. Haiti is becoming increasingly dependent on remittances from its immigrants, which now represent 35 percent of Haiti's GDP.

He goes on to outline a five-point economic agenda for Haiti with which I fully agree:

1. Reject all the different versions of the structural adjustment policies of the IFIs that require that Haiti remove tariffs on food and other imports, privatize public enterprises, exempt foreign investors from taxes on their profits in the assembly industries, and curb social spending.
2. Launch an immediate large-scale and national public works project to rebuild or expand Haiti's infrastructure, communication, transportation, public schools, public health facilities, and public housing.

3. Prioritize Haiti's food security and sovereignty by launching an agrarian reform, and subsidizing production for the local market as well as for export.
4. Promote the development of local and national agro-industries that use domestic inputs to produce consumer and durable goods; and support the national handicraft industry and promote its expansion on the international market.
5. Protect workers' rights, such as the right to form trade unions and the right to strike, and provide a living wage to all workers, especially in the export assembly industries.

With regard to CARICOM: I am not one of those who criticize the supposed tardiness of its response. Within 48 hours of the quake, for instance, PM Golding of Jamaica was in Haiti with a team of engineers from the Jamaica Defence Force. Caricom has in fact been making strenuous efforts in the most difficult of circumstances, due to the fact that the US military control the airport and prevented a delegation from landing; and as Andy Johnson reported in Sunday Express, the Caricom effort is reliant on the Canadians for logistical support. But the outpouring of support for Haitians in all Caricom countries has been remarkable.

But there is a political dimension to this whole relief effort that we must confront squarely, even as we support all efforts to get food and water and shelter to the millions who have been made homeless and destitute. The political question is this: will the earthquake be used as an opportunity and a pretext for the physical recolonization of Haiti, for the entrenchment of an even deeper form of international trusteeship that we have had in the recent past?

Naomi Klein in her book The Shock Doctrine, refers to the doctrine that was "developed by the ultra-right wing American economist, Milton Friedman, to the effect that traumatic man made or natural disasters are to be used by conservative capitalist ideologues to impose radical right wing economic and social policies on the disaster struck and traumatized population" ([PEP statement](#)). To the Shock Doctrine believer, the earthquake was a heaven-sent opportunity. In a posting on its website the day after the earthquake, the conservative US think tank [The Heritage Foundation](#) let the proverbial cat out of the bag when it said

"Amidst the Suffering, Crisis in Haiti Offers Opportunities to the U.S.

In addition to providing immediate humanitarian assistance, the U.S. response to the tragic earthquake in Haiti earthquake offers opportunities to re-shape Haiti's long-dysfunctional government and economy as well as to improve the public image of the United States in the region...

While on the ground in Haiti, the U.S. military can also interrupt the nightly flights of cocaine to Haiti and the Dominican Republic from the Venezuelan coast and counter the ongoing efforts of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to destabilize the island of Hispaniola. This U.S. military presence, which should also include a large contingent of U.S. Coast Guard assets, can also prevent any large-scale movement by Haitians to take to the sea in rickety watercraft to try to enter the U.S. illegally.

Meanwhile, the U.S. must be prepared to insist that the Haiti government work closely with the U.S. to insure that corruption does not infect the humanitarian assistance flowing to Haiti. Long-term reforms for Haitian democracy and its economy are also badly overdue".

We are indebted to [Prof Michel Chossudovsky](#) of the University of Ottawa for drawing attention to the scale of the US Military deployment to Haiti decided within one day of the earthquake.;

The military component of the US mission, however, tends to overshadow the civilian functions of rescuing a desperate and impoverished population. The overall humanitarian operation is not being led by civilian governmental agencies such as FEMA or USAID, but by the Pentagon.

The dominant decision making role has been entrusted to US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM).

A massive deployment of military hardware and personnel is contemplated. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen has confirmed that the US will be sending nine to ten thousand troops to Haiti, including 2000 marines. (American Forces Press Service, January 14, 2010)

Aircraft carrier, USS Carl Vinson and its complement of supporting ships has already arrived in Port au Prince. (January 15, 2010). The 2,000-member Marine Amphibious Unit as well as and soldiers from the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne division "are trained in a wide variety of missions including security and riot-control in addition to humanitarian tasks."

The US military took over the airport and reportedly stopped a Caricom delegation from landing, and also a team from Doctors without Borders and several other medical and humanitarian flights. From the strategic point of view, I can think of at least five functions served by the latest US military occupation of Haiti—for that is what it is:

1. To prevent an influx of Haitian boat refugees to US shores
2. To directly re-shape the politics and economics of post-earthquake Haiti
3. To displace Brazilian military influence, exercised through the large deployment of Brazilian troops in the United Nations mission MINUSTAH, which was badly degraded by the earthquake itself; Brazil now regarded as a rival to US in the hemisphere
4. To counter Venezuelan and Cuban influence in Haiti: Venezuela is a large creditor to Haiti through Petrocaribe and Cuba has a large deployment of medical personnel in Haiti, The Preval administration of Haiti was strongly considering joining ALBA
5. To tighten the military encirclement of Venezuela and Cuba, building on the reactivation of the US Fourth Fleet, the coup in Honduras which is the site of a large military base, the coup being aimed at keeping Honduras out of ALBA, and continued with the agreement with Colombia in 2009 to access seven military bases in that country; and the renewal of agreements with the Netherlands for the use of bases in Aruba and Curacao.

One might also mention the coup last July carried out by the British in the Turks and Caicos islands, right next to Haiti, and ask whether this was entirely related to domestic issues in the TCI or whether it was not part of a bigger strategic design.

In such a situation what can Caricom do? Caricom which lacks military and economic muscle, which has not assets other than its moral authority and the fact that Haiti is a member of the Community. It is being said that Caricom's role in the reconstruction is going to be in the field of 'governance' but I see a danger here—the danger of acting as a surrogate or even an agent of the Western governments and donor agencies in promoting their particular agenda of 'good governance' in Haiti—an agenda which is ultimately aimed at promoting their interests. I see the danger of becoming embroiled in Haitian politics, which will undoubtedly become a very complicated matter in post-earthquake Haiti. Opposition to the MINUSTAH mission in Haiti had been growing for some time before the earthquake and opposition to the US military is certain to grow—already there are [reports](#) of killings of civilians by foreign troops and of American soldiers being "accused of kidnapping adult men and women from airports ocean sides where they are hoping to leave the island and taking them to rural areas and leaving them without food water etc & stripping them of their clothing". So I think Caricom should tread carefully on the matter of governance.

On Saturday I wrote [a letter to former Prime Minister PJ Patterson](#) of Jamaica, who has been named Caricom's representative to the International Committee coordinating the relief effort, that is to say the Committee mainly of western donors and donor agencies, that met yesterday in Montreal. The letter was

widely circulated with the help of others and in about 36 hours we had secured [over 130 messages of support](#) from Caribbean citizens and others here and in the Diaspora. The support was quite remarkable. The gist of the letter is

1. We should recognize that the international community, as a donor to Haiti over more than two decades, also bears responsibility for ill-conceived and poorly-conducted development, political interference, and unfulfilled promises in Haiti.
2. The reconstruction of Haiti should be carried out in a way that is effective and accountable to all Haitians and assigns to Haitians themselves the responsibility for identifying their immediate and long-term needs and for creating and strengthening the structures required.
3. To oppose and approach that is 'security-centred'; that militarizes the relief and rehabilitation effort; and that undermines Haitian ownership, initiative, responsibility and sovereignty. Rather, it should be based on the principles of solidarity, respect for their rights and respect for their country's sovereignty.
4. That international assistance should:
 - (i) Prioritize the delivery of Humanitarian Assistance by Civilian Agencies;
 - ii) Protect the Rights of Vulnerable Populations;
 - iii) Ensure Haitian Leadership, Ownership and Decision-Making; and,
 - iii) Focus on Ending Poverty.

Well it seems that the main result of the meeting was to agree that another 'donor conference' will be held for Haiti. Let us hope that it will not be more of the same. The media has covered this meeting extensively, but much less publicity, if any at all, has given to the ALBA meeting that took place in Caracas yesterday. ALBA has already approved a comprehensive project for emergency relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction of Haiti in the area of health, and has expressed its wish and willingness to collaborate with all other countries and agencies . Aand the [ALBA Declaration on Haiti](#) affirms that “ Efforts to rebuild Haiti must have the people and government of that country as the principal protagonists, respecting the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as the broader, equitable, participatory and transparent joint work of the international community in the reconstruction of Haiti”.

This is why we propose that vocabulary of “assistance” and “relief” be replaced by the vocabulary of “solidarity”. As [Dr Alissa Trotz](#) said in her commentary on the Stabroek news:

The language of charity is not the model, for it springs from pity and is not based on a principle of equality. It ends up enhancing the generosity of the giver and - ironically - emphasizing the distance and disconnection between the giver and the receiver.

Solidarity is not about charity. It is not about international trusteeship. It is not about recolonization. It is not about military occupation. It is not about telling people what to do.

The basis of solidarity is respect. Respect for the equality and dignity of each individual and for the sovereignty of the nation. Respect for the inherent capacity that resides in every person. To give support without imposing or intruding. Solidarity seeks no material gain from giving, for it springs from consciousness of shared humanity. It is about offering scholarships, not sending in arrogant and patronizing consultants. It is about sending doctors, not soldiers.

I end by quoting from a [statement sent to the Montreal Conference](#) signed by nearly 200 global, national, regional and local popular organizations and networks and over 40 individuals:

Haitian society, its organizations, social movements and state representatives should be the protagonists of the international effort to rebuild their country: the first to be heard and the final and sovereign decision over their destiny. The Haitian people have lifted themselves up many times on the basis of their own will, with the strength and conviction of their historical example of having been the

first people to free themselves in America. Any cooperation can be effective only if it is based in this commitment and full popular participation.

Thank you.