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Haiti's Viability in Doubt

by LADB Staff

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The regime of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was put on notice by the US ambassador that, unless the government enacts decisive reforms, the country's future will be even more bleak than its past (see NotiCen, 2002-11-07). With demonstrations against the administration increasing and poverty deepening, the message from Washington is that new elections are the only way out.

"If Haiti falls into its historical past of authoritarian government, misrule, and abuse of human rights, its future will be as somber as its past," said US Ambassador James Foley. There is some doubt, though, if even an election would confer legitimacy on the government. Opposition groups have refused to participate in any election unless Aristide resigns and the government can guarantee security.

Government spokesman Mario Dupuy said, "To hold free and democratic elections is a constitutional obligation. We want to hold them but we can't hold them alone." Gonaives students protest against government There is little sign that the government could, or would, provide security.

The latest demonstration, on Dec. 8, saw hundreds of students building flaming tire barricades at intersections in Gonaives, on the West Coast. The students started the protest in front of their high school, demanding Aristide's resignation. Demonstrations of this kind have been staged with increasing frequency since the legislative elections of 2000, which were generally viewed as flawed. Gonaives was once a stronghold of Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party but more recently has turned anti-government, even though Aristide still maintains some popularity among the poorest, those who helped him ascend to the presidency.

Aristide was Haiti's first democratically elected president. He was deposed in a 1991 military coup and restored to office after a US invasion in 1994. He stepped down in 1996 and was re-elected in 2000 to a term that ends in 2006. Aristide has not wavered from the position that he will serve out the term.

The Gonaives confrontation came just days after a larger protest in the capital, Port-au-Prince, where at least two dozen people were injured at the University of Haiti in skirmishes between government supporters and students calling for the president's resignation. Six people were shot, five of whom were students.

Haiti on brink of disaster

The government and its legitimacy aside, however, there is some question whether any government, under any circumstances, could bring everyday Haitian life to internationally acceptable standards. "The world doesn't have any idea how bad this situation is getting here; nobody's paying any

attention to Haiti," Alain Grimard, a senior diplomat with the UN Development Program (UNDP) told a South Florida Sun-Sentinel reporter. "And at the heart of it is the very severe environmental crisis in this country. The Haitian case is really quite unique in the world now. You have too many people living on land that can no longer support them."

Masking the intensively deforested landscape's inability to support human life at its present levels, billions of dollars in international aid has kept Haiti alive. A Haitian diaspora in the US and elsewhere sends an estimated US\$800 million annually in cash, food, and clothing to relatives on the island.

Simon Fass, author of *Political Economy in Haiti: The Drama of Survival*, told a reporter, "If you stopped that food aid overnight, the population would probably be cut in half to 4 million. The rest would starve to death. You have a society in which everyone is trying to get out. But nobody wants them to get out. Yet nobody wants them to starve. If it were someplace far away, like Somalia or Ethiopia, then that would be fine. But it's too close. So what you end up with is a sort of 'Haiti World,' where everyone stays alive on welfare from abroad."

Most of Haiti World's support comes from Florida, where some 267,000 legal and another 230,000 undocumented Haitians have reached the Promised Land. Most Haitians in Florida have maintained strong ties to home. But the donations do not provide the material conditions for sustainability. One in three Haitian children is malnourished. Rice production has fallen precipitously over the past decade, as the exhausted land becomes ever less able to support a population that rapes it for their own survival. People eat the bark off the few remaining trees and the opportunistic weeds still able to grow in the dead dirt.

They dig up the roots of trees long dead and gone to make charcoal. They do this knowing that the practice further impoverishes them and the earth. Now, 99% of the natural tree cover is gone, leaving millions of tons of topsoil to wash away each year.

The situation amazes Grimard. "Who knows when the end point will come, when it all just collapses?" he said. "Every year the situation grows so bad you can't see how it will last much longer. Last year we forecast different crisis points the price of oil, the price of food and things have surpassed those." The Sun-Sentinel reported that 400 rivers and streams have silted up and disappeared over the last 20 years. With all but five of the country's 30 watersheds denuded, only 10% of rainfall penetrates the ground, far less than what is needed to replenish aquifers.

The country that was once known as the Pearl of the Antilles now ranks last in the world for access to drinkable water, according to the Center for Ecology and Hydrology in the United Kingdom. New Mexico-like desert conditions have overtaken much of the once lush land. Erosion has made a muddy mess of the country's roads, making travel, commerce, and the distribution of vital food, water, and medicine difficult and fomenting disease as water pools and stagnates.

A Canadian International Development Agency report, cited by the paper, said, "For every 100 deaths of children under five years old, more than 50 had symptoms linked to typhoid, dysentery bacilli, and various parasites that infest the fetid water." International agencies contribute to

problems Any hope that aid from abroad could help the situation is necessarily tempered by the fact that some of these efforts of the "international community" have contributed more to the problem than to a solution. Rice farmers have been hampered by played-out soils and silted-in watercourses. But they have been destroyed by the insistence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that the Haitian government withhold subsidies to the farmers in exchange for foreign aid that never reached those farmers or the families that depended on them.

In the end, even rice producers whose lands could produce a crop were driven out by the cheap imports. During the past 20 years, Haiti has become one of the world's largest importers of "Miami rice," as Haitians call imported rice, over 200,000 tons annually. The breaking of the agricultural economy by trade liberalization has fueled violence in productive regions of the country. The Artibonite Valley, the rice basket of Haiti, is now in permanent conflict.

Said Jean Willy Jean-Baptiste, head of the Development Organization of the Artibonite Valley, "The Artibonite is a very real hot zone because we have people taking their machetes to solve their irrigation problems. Sometimes one fight over a canal leads to 10 or 12 deaths. It's neighborhood against neighborhood because one place is getting water, but further down the canal it's dried up." Deteriorating conditions in the agricultural areas have led also to migrations to the cities. People unwilling to murder each other over possession of puddles have, in the tens of thousands, become economic refugees in urban areas. Thus, Port-au-Prince has a growth rate greater than any major city in the world and has a greater share of the national population than any city in the Western Hemisphere, about a third of the entire population.

About 2.8 million people live in the capital. Once there, quality of life for the migrants declines even further, as they find they have no marketable urban skills. Now they are jammed into areas whose population density is the highest in the world. In the shantytown Cite Soleil, the density measures 750 people per acre. Shacks of less than 1 sq meter house as many as a dozen people. The exit of least resistance for full-to-bursting Haiti is the 360-km border with the Dominican Republic.

Looking across the border at a landscape about which one environmentalist said, "I don't even know if you can call what's on the Haitian side an environment any more," Dominican military authorities earlier this year called Haiti a security threat. The World Bank has estimated that at least 6% of the Dominican Republic's 8.4 million people are Haitians. Other experts say the number is at least twice that.

With the Nov. 30 official end of the hurricane season, Haitians take the better-known exit option, that of crowding aboard rickety and unseaworthy boats headed for the US. On Dec. 9, US officials repatriated 361 Haitians after a Coast Guard cutter intercepted their 54-foot sloop near Great Inagua Island in the Bahamas. Had the US agency not intercepted them, Tropical Storm Odette might have.

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