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Rights Groups Urge Haiti Leave Trade Pact with EU

by Mike Leffert

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[The following article by Charles Arthur is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the Oct. 17, 2007, edition of Latinamerica Press.] Development and human rights organizations in Haiti are campaigning against the signing of a new trade relationship with the European Union (EU) that they say will strike a further blow against the country's already ailing economy. An Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the EU and the 16 Caribbean nations grouped together as CARIFORUM is set to be signed by the end of this year.

Standing up to the EPA threat

The Haitian government has indicated that it is ready to sign, but Haitian organizations, including those representing peasant farmers, say the agreement which will eliminate tariffs on goods traded between signatory nations will destroy the country's agricultural sector, which provides a livelihood for around two-thirds of the country's 8 million people. Campaigners stress that the Haitian economy needs more protection, not less.

The EU has been negotiating these trade agreements for five years with groups of mostly former European colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia. The EPAs are set to replace the existing trade structure, the Cotonou Convention, which expires on Dec. 31 of this year. EU negotiators state that the agreements will help these countries to develop their economies, many of which rely on basic commodity exports, and will help foster regional markets by attracting foreign investment.

But a newly formed coalition of nine Haitian organizations and networks, called Bare APE in Creole (Block the EPA), disagrees. On Sept. 26, the coalition, which includes the Tet Kole peasant movement and the Platform to Advocate for Alternative Development (Plateforme Haitienne de Plaidoyer pour un Developpement Alternatif, PAPDA), launched a campaign of demonstrations, workshops, and meetings with government entities and international organizations. "This mobilization will allow various sectors of our nation to continue to consider the best ways to arrive at an alternative, sustainable development by protecting the vital sectors of national production and to prevent the European Union from mortgaging this country's chances of development," the coalition said in a statement on the eve of the campaign launch.

One of the driving forces behind the campaign is Camille Chalmers, director of the PAPDA. He points to rice, the staple diet of the vast majority of Haitians, stating that the reduction of protective tariffs on imported rice and the absence of state support for rice farmers in recent decades have already taken their toll. "Haiti was self-sufficient in food until 1972. In 1985 we produced 123,000 metric tons of rice, but the latest figures for 2006 indicate we produced just 76,000 MT and imported 342,000 MT," he said. "We have the most outrageous situation. Haiti, the poorest country on the American continent, is one of the top four importers of rice from the US. If the trend continues, we will witness the disappearance of rice production, and 120,000 people will become unemployed."

Another critic of the proposed EPA is Jean-Baptiste Charles, the director of the dairy production program of the Veterimed organization that helps peasant farmers improve production. Veterimed's dairy-production program has revitalized milk production, but Charles laments the fact that "theoretically we have enough milk to supply national demand, yet we are continuing to import milk to the cost of around US\$30 million a year." Charles says his organization sees the industrialized countries subsidizing their producers and then their cheaper products invade the markets of countries like Haiti. The result is that Haitian farmers are forced out of business.

Agriculture threatened

"We see four basic areas of Haitian agricultural production: sugarcane, rice, chickens, and chicken eggs and over recent years we estimate that 830,000 jobs have been lost," said Chalmers. He says the impact of the EPA and the total opening of the Haitian economy to foreign imports will hit not just the agricultural sector but also the whole country's chances of development. "The EPAs will deliver multiple blows to the economies of poor countries like Haiti. There will be a budgetary blow because the elimination of import tariffs will reduce the resources that each state needs to finance development and public services, thus creating an even greater dependence on the international finance institutions," says Chalmers.

The Haitian government itself has taken little interest in the EPA negotiation process and until recently had mandated the CARICOM regional body of which it is one of the 15 members to negotiate on its behalf. In one of the few public statements about the EPA process, in late April at a meeting convened by the UN Industrial Development Organization, Minister of Commerce and Industry Maguy Durce appeared to embrace the EPA, saying, "The moment has come for us to set to work, to evaluate our strengths and weaknesses, and in particular to face up to the competition from regional and European companies, and especially the requirements of reciprocal engagements."

With the Haitian government dependent on loans and grants from international finance institutions that are, in turn, disbursed on condition that the government refrain from erecting protective trade barriers, there appears little likelihood that the anti-EPA campaigners can stop the process.

However, as the Dec. 31 deadline approaches, the failure of European and Caribbean trade negotiators to agree on many matters of principle and detail, despite years of discussion, has cast a shadow over the EPA. The Haitian campaigners will be hoping for more time to pressure their government to reconsider the agreement's implications.

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