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Hungry Haitians Could Bring Down Regime As Food Costs Soar

by LADB Staff

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The "humanitarian tsunami" predicted for Africa has hit, slapping down Haiti for good measure. European Union (EU) humanitarian aid commissioner Louis Michel said, after a meeting with African Union Commission (AUC) president Jean Ping, "A global food crisis is becoming apparent, less visible than the oil crisis, but with the potential effect of a real economic and humanitarian tsunami in Africa." In early April, the potential became kinetic in the Caribbean, in Haiti.

The poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere is the canary in the coalmine for the Americas. Globally, World Food Program (WFP) officials have highlighted food riots sweeping the developing world and warned that a "perfect storm" of poor harvests, rising fuel prices, the biofuel fad that has rich countries stuffing food-derived alcohol into their gas tanks, and a swelling middle class in China and India is increasing world hunger (see NotiCen, 2007-04-12). On April 4, a reported 5,000 people turned out on the streets of the southern peninsula city of Les Cayes, chanting slogans against President Rene Preval. As Haitian police stood idly by, the protesters grabbed rice bags from trucks and tried to burn the UN mission police base. One person was shot.

On the coast in Gonaives, UN workers were evacuated to a police base. The protests there were without violence, however. The next day, the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) reported the Les Cayes situation as tense. The mission dispatched 100 additional troops, whom they euphemistically refer to as peacekeepers, to Les Cayes for reinforcements. High-ranking police officials went along to oversee UN police operations and coordinate with the Haitian National Police (HNP). Violent outbreaks continued through the following week, with at least five people reported shot to death and about 14 brought to the Port-au-Prince public hospital with bullet wounds. The count was confused; Association of Haitian Doctors president Claude Surena said the toll was provisional. "We're getting a lot of conflicting information," he said.

Officials began to acknowledge the possibility that the government would fall, and President Rene Preval called in UN blue helmets to protect the presidential palace from hungry hordes protesting high food and fuel prices. The protesters called for Preval to resign. Brazilian soldiers surrounded the palace, firing in the air and hurling tear gas. UN troops were also busy beating back protesters heading to the international airport. Two reporters, a photographer, and a TV cameraman suffered rubber-bullet wounds from the MINUSTAH troops.

The UN envoy to Haiti, Hedi Annabi, called for urgent food aid, saying that close to 80% of Haiti's people live on less than US\$2 a day and are seriously affected by increases in prices for basic food items. He told reporters, "I think we have made progress in stabilizing the country, but that progress is extremely fragile, highly reversible, and made even more fragile by the current socioeconomic environment." In making his appeal for supplies of affordable food that could keep the country from falling back into the chaos that is never far away, Annabi warned, "At the same time, we need to

remain vigilant and respond robustly so that we do not allow these demonstrations to be exploited by people with political motivations or by people belonging to various camps."

There have been some improvements in the overall economic numbers for the country in recent months, but the perturbations caused by food prices served to show how miniscule those improvements really are. Economic growth has returned to the 1991 level of 3.2%, and inflation fell to 8% from highs a few years ago of 40%. But those numbers are insufficient to keep people afloat in the face of a doubling of prices of staples including rice, beans, fruit, condensed milk, and pasta. The WFP has made an urgent appeal for donations for Haiti, but that has to be taken in context. Food rioting of this same deadly sort has broken out in Egypt, Cameroon, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. Less deadly protests have occurred in Cambodia, Indonesia, Mozambique, Uzbekistan, Yemen, and Bolivia. Countries not experiencing popular uprising fear it, hoarding their own supplies. China, Vietnam, India, and Pakistan, rice exporters all, are putting export restrictions in place.

UN undersecretary for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator John Holmes said political stability throughout the developing world is in jeopardy. "The security implications [of the food crisis] should not be underestimated as food riots are already being reported across the globe," he said, adding ominously, "Current food-price trends are likely to increase sharply both the incidence and depth of food insecurity." Vice president of the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) Kanayo Nwanza predicted "escalated social unrest" spreading to other countries.

In the midst of this universe of panicked activity, President Preval had made no public statements until April 9. Some kind of appeal from the president to his people had been expected for at least a week. "I believe that if President Preval talks to the people about the high cost of living, people will listen to the president and go home," said Sen. Joseph Lambert. "If not, if there is an attempt at a coup d'etat to remove the president, things will get worse." Messages that a statement from the president was imminent were broadcast as the situation continued to deteriorate. Black smoke from burning tires was seen in Petionville, the neighborhood of diplomats and foreigners. The roads to other enclaves of the rich, in the mountains above the capital, were blocked. Protesters threw rocks at the US Embassy, where routine operations including visa services have been suspended. US citizens in the capital were advised not to go outside.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack was astonishingly dismissive of the situation as he told reporters, "We suspended embassy operations for today because of some of the violence and demonstrations that's taken place in Haiti. We fully hope and expect that over time those demonstrations will dissipate and we will get back to a situation where we can continue normal embassy operations." Preval speaks Finally, on April 9, Preval spoke as new violence was breaking out. In a televised address, he told the people, "I have ordered the Haitian police and UN soldiers to put an end to the looting. The solution to the high cost of living is global, and we are paying the price for all the bad policies applied for 20 years in Haiti.

The demonstrations and destruction won't make the prices go down or resolve the country's problems. On the contrary, this can make the misery grow and prevent investment in the country."

In case his listeners were not of a mind to consider the sensitivities of venture capitalists, Preval also told them straight out to "cool it," using the Creole word "poze." "To those who are stirring up violence, I order you to stop because it is not going to solve the problem," said Preval. The president went into some detail on what he thought would solve the problem. "Instead of subsidizing the price of food products coming from abroad, we'd rather subsidize national production," he said. "I propose that the price of fertilizer be subsidized by 50% and even more. We won't solve the problem of the high cost of living with violence and with easy economic decisions but by supporting national production." Reiterating that he had no control of global prices, he said that well-paid public-sector workers, those making around US\$800 a month, would take a 10% decrease in wages so that money would be freed for this and other more pressing uses. The mobs of angry people in the streets have, for the most part, been shouting a simple message, "We're hungry." But indications are that their frustration is soon to take on a familiar partisan caste.

In Cite Soleil, poverty-ridden barrio stronghold of the Fanmi Lavalas party loyal to ousted and exiled ex-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004), Preval's rival, the priest Gerard Jean-Juste (see NotiCen, 2005-04-28) called upon the president to lead the people. "The people are marching. Some cannot take any more hunger. I call upon all government officials to do their best possible to find ways to solve the situation," he said. Intensely partisan though Jean-Juste is, his calls echo the comments of many critics who have charged that the Preval government and the international community that sustains it have focused too much on political stability and not enough on alleviating the gnawing poverty that has now become genuine hunger with the possibility of starvation ahead. Already people are eating concoctions of dirt, chalk, and vegetable shortening, and using terms like "grangou klowox" (eating bleach) to describe the burning sensation of too-long empty stomachs.

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