

4-17-2008

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## Prime Minister Ousted As Haiti Buckles Under Food Crisis

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Haitia

Published: 2008-04-17

Food riots have crippled the Haitian government. On April 12, reacting to more than a week of riots caused by the crippling cost of food, the Haitian Senate voted to fire Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis. Sixteen of 17 senators voted for Alexis' removal in a special session of the legislative body. Alexis is a longtime ally of President Rene Preval, who placed him at the head of a coalition Cabinet to unite the politically torn nation. This was Alexis' second turn as prime minister. He held the post during Preval's first presidential term (1996-2001).

The ouster was seen generally as a serious, but not yet fatal, blow to Preval. The Senate action came just after Preval spoke to the nation in an effort to calm violent demonstrations against food prices that have become simply unaffordable for most Haitians. Many have been reduced to eating dirt to fend off the pain of hunger (see NotiCen, 2008-04-10). An organizer of the ouster, Sen. Youri Latortue, said Alexis had failed to do anything to increase food production, improve security, or set a deadline for UN troops to leave. Latortue is the nephew of Gerard Latortue, the widely despised interim prime minister installed by the US after the downfall of the government of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004) in February 2004 (see NotiCen, 2004-03-04).

Reporters generally go into the streets to gauge reaction to events in this country where polling is not always convenient. A Reuters correspondent found the comments of 29-year-old Jean Piere Jean-Baptiste fairly representative. "When he was prime minister, he did nothing to lower the high cost of living. I hope things will change with a new prime minister," said the electrician.

The unscheduled legislative session and loss of his prime minister caught Preval unaware. The president had just made public a plan to mitigate prices minimally. This was an arrangement to cut the price of a bag of rice from US\$51 to US\$43 by getting the private-sector food industry to contribute US\$3 of the cut and international donors the rest. Preval declined to cut taxes on food because, he said, the revenue was needed to fund job creation and agricultural projects. "The situation is difficult everywhere around the world. Everyone has to make a sacrifice," he said. The cut seemed unlikely to mollify a populace creamed by at least a doubling of commodity prices in a period of just weeks. Back on the street, an unnamed citizen told a reporter, "It has not been lowered enough. If they don't further lower the price, I think people are going to protest more. There will be problems, more unrest. Even the National Palace could be set on fire because we are in trouble." Despite the warning, the price did not go down in succeeding days. In many places, it did not even go down to the promised US\$43. Venders continued to sell older stocks at the old price. Again, there were warnings. Legislator Jean Beauvior Dorson admonished, "The government and importers have to say without any further delay when exactly the cut in rice prices will be effective. Should the government fail to do so, we should expect more violent incidents between buyers and venders."

Brazilian troops from the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) minimized violence somewhat by distributing rice, beans, sugar, and cooking oil to 1,500 families in Cite Soleil. It did

not go unnoticed that the food was flown in from the country of the hemisphere that most supports biofuel production (see NotiSur, 2007-04-27). And, it was not very much food. The Brazilian Air Force brought in 14 tons and bought another 2 tons of rice locally. People lined up for hours under heavy guard to get the six-kg packages. One recipient estimated the package would last him, his mother, and six siblings a single day. Preval said he would seek help from Venezuela, which has become a resource of last resort while rich nations dither. He will seek, among other things, fertilizers from that country to boost national agricultural output and return some life to soils and croplands destroyed by erosion, deforestation, flooding, and storms.

The international dithering has taken different forms in different places in the first world. With its collective head firmly in the seemingly endless run-up to presidential elections and its various current and prospective wars, the US has seemed minimally concerned with the growing world food crisis. In Europe, officialdom has defended the practice of using food to brew alcohol to feed to cars. Even the UN Security Council chose to censure Haiti for the death of one of its blue-helmeted troops rather than to take serious action against the food crisis. In Asia, rice-exporting countries have announced curtailment of exports. Haiti imports more than 80% of its rice. Fueling immorality Humanitarian organizations are overwhelmed. Caritas Australia called for a global response to a situation it said already affects 820 million people and is certain to get much worse.

The organization's chief executive Jack de Groot went to the heart of it, the biofuels obsession. "Everyone has jumped on the biofuels bandwagon, and, while biofuels such as ethanol are part of the answer to the climate crisis, it is completely immoral to be diverting food stocks to fuel while people are starving. Our own region is joining a growing crisis that extends from the Philippines to Haiti, across to Malawi, and back to East Timor, which are all staggering into a food crisis," said de Groot. He said the UN World Food Program (WFP) had to become more than a collector and distributor of food and actively pursue policies to let local communities become sovereign regarding their food security. Many countries gave up their food security chasing the alleged benefits of globalization. "But," said Melbourne University's Professor Anne Capeling, "the situation with food globally is changing very quickly, and maybe the kind of globalization we're going to see in the future is not going to be negotiated liberalization, it's going to be by governments that are seeking cheaper access to food in light of world food shortages."

Countries like those of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), once eagerly following advice to give up their noncompetitive agriculture to pursue their cheap-labor comparative advantage and leave the food supply to market forces, may now find themselves abandoned by those advisors. At the spring meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Group of Seven industrialized nations gave little attention to the food crisis, mesmerized as they were by an issue closer to their hearts, the financial crisis that they fear threatens to give them their first taste of poverty.

World Bank president Robert Zoellick tried to drum up interest in the food issue, saying that policymakers should continue to deal with the financial problems, but they needed to attend to the food crisis now to avoid a worse situation later. "We estimate that a doubling of food prices over the last three years could potentially push 100 million people in low-income countries deeper into poverty," he said. "This is not just a question about short-term needs, as important as those are. This is about ensuring that future generations don't pay a price, too." IMF managing director Dominique

Strauss-Kahn put a finer point on it. "As we know, learning from the past, those kinds of questions sometimes end in war," he said. Strauss-Kahn called this the worst crisis since the 1930s Great Depression.

US President George W. Bush authorized US\$200 million in emergency food aid. About this modest sum, White House press secretary Dana Perino said, "This additional food aid will address the impact of rising commodity prices on US emergency food-aid programs and be used to meet unanticipated food-aid needs in Africa and elsewhere." These needs were by no means unanticipated. The problem was that the wrong people anticipated them.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and then Cuban leader Fidel Castro called attention to the immorality and possible consequences of using food for fuel (see NotiCen, 2007-04-12). After Bush's ethanol-touting trip to Central America last year, Castro wrote, "This colossal squandering of cereals destined to fuel production...serves to save rich countries less than 15% of the total annual consumption of their voracious automobiles. At Camp David, Bush declared his intention to apply this formula around the world. This spells nothing other than the internationalization of genocide." At the same time, Chavez noted, "When you fill a vehicle's tank with ethanol, you are filling it with energy for which enough land and water to feed seven people have been used."

One year, almost to the day, since the two leaders made these comments, the voracious contagion has spread to Europe, where, on April 14, the European Commission rejected claims that biofuel production is a food-destroying "crime against humanity." Barbara Helfferich, EU spokesperson for Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas, told the media, "There is no question for now of suspending the target fixed for biofuels. You can't change a political objective without risking a debate on all the other objectives." She was responding to a statement on German radio from UN special rapporteur for the right to food Jean Ziegler, who leveled the "crime against humanity" charge. Ziegler dismissed the notion that European ethanol production would not harm world food supplies. EU Agriculture Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel had claimed that target amounts of fuel would be gotten from higher yields and increased production. But Ziegler pointed out that EU production has served to destroy Third World ability to provide for itself. "The EU finances the exports of European agricultural surpluses to Africa, where they are offered at one-half or one-third of their production price," he said. "That completely ruins African agriculture." Biofuel production and the subsidies heaped upon the producers have aroused the ire even of the head of Nestle, the world's biggest food and beverage company. Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, company CEO, said, "To grant enormous subsidies for biofuel production is morally unacceptable and irresponsible. There will be nothing left to eat."

European support for the fuel project has shown a hairline fracture. While there is huge support for the plan to use the fuel to improve the continent's air quality, France is exhibiting signs of opposition ahead of a May 7 meeting of the 27 EU nations to approve production criteria. French Agriculture Minister Michel Barnier told his EU counterparts in mid-April that food production must be the priority. In Germany, officials have begun to admit that food-derived biofuels produce inferior fuels in an inefficient, probably negatively efficient, manner and that the windfall to the farmers is just a stopgap until a more efficient process using wood and straw can come on line. The second-generation process, as it is being called, is not new but rather was developed in East

Germany during the Cold War. The socialist state founded the German Fuel Institute in Freiberg as a strategy against the possibility of losing western sources of oil. The research was based on Nazi coal-conversion technology and is said now to produce sulfur-free fuels that "do not harm particle filters or engines and meet top emissions standards." But commercially viable production of this stuff is years away, and in the meantime upward price pressure on foodstuffs will continue apace with the politics of biofuels.

There seem no bright spots for Haiti and other most impoverished countries like it in Africa and elsewhere. While some lip service was given their plight at the World Bank-IMF meetings, no response was given to Haitian activists' requests for debt relief. This is money that could be used to build the infrastructure and roads," said Marleine Bastien, executive director of Haitian Women of Miami. Nor were Preval's requests to President Bush to provide Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to undocumented Haitians in the US given any response. TPS could ease the situation by not deporting Haitians back into an already unmanageable situation. "The country is on the brink of starvation," noted Jean-Robert Lafortune, chair of the Haitian-American Grassroots Coalition in Miami's Little Haiti.

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