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Report Charges Criminality In U.S. Withholding Clean Water To Haiti

by LADB Staff

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Without a government since the ouster of ex-Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis April 12, without sufficient food since the world food crisis put an adequate daily ration beyond the means of the poor, one Haitian city now finds itself without any clean drinking water, even though the money to build a water system has been available for a decade. The prime minister was lost for want of food, caused, said critics, by the US-led biofuel mania that sent prices soaring.

Now a new report charges the US is behind the water shortage in "one of the most egregious examples of malfeasance by the United States in recent years." The report was prepared by the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (CHRGJ) at the New York University School of Law, Partners in Health, the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights, and Zanme Lasante, a Haitian advocacy group. The title is Woch nan Soley, taken from a Kreyol saying, "The rocks in the water don't know the suffering of the rocks in the sun."

Evan Lyon, a physician who has worked in Haiti since 1996 and participated in producing the report, said, "There is not a question a crime was committed" in the US delaying the disbursement of US\$54 million that was to be spent on providing access to clean drinking water in Port-de-Paix. Lyon works with Partners in Health, the Haiti-based healthcare provider founded by Paul Farmer, MD.

The 87-page report says that, ten years after the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) approved the loan, the city of 100,000 still does not have potable water. The report uses documents and emails obtained from the US Department of the Treasury, through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) lawsuit, and discovered "a high level of strategic interference by US personnel to stall the disbursement of these loans indefinitely in order to use them as leverage for political change." The US manipulation of the disbursements was originally linked to its opposition to President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, whose administration fell to a military coup in 1991.

He returned to power in 2001, but was again ousted. Aristide charged the administration of US President George W. Bush engineered his second fall. US officials have said that Aristide, who was carried off to a waiting plane by US personnel, had left the country and his presidency voluntarily. Coincident with Aristide's 2001 return to power, US Ambassador to Haiti Dean Curran said publicly, "There are now a certain number of loans of the Inter-American Development Bank that are not yet disbursed with the objective of trying to request of the protagonists of the current situation, in the current political crisis, to reach a compromise."

A smoking-gun email recovered by the FOIA suit found a top Treasury Department official calling it a "major screw up" for Curran to explicitly acknowledge a connection between the loans and the US political agenda for Haiti. The Treasury Department holds a great deal of influence over the

IDB. Monika Varma of the RFK center called the use of that influence in this instance a "calculated attempt to implement a political policy with total disregard for the impact on the ground." US government manipulation of multinational institutions is, she said, "a pretty common practice."

US must be watched

The authors of the report have called for regular monitoring of US government behavior in Haiti and countries like it. Years after the 1998 IDB approval of the loans, payments began, but the water projects were never started, "largely the result of aggressive attempts by the US government to block the disbursement of these funds," even though the IDB charter expressly forbids it from interfering in the political affairs of its member countries.

Avoiding direct comment on the violation of its own rules, IDB spokesman Peter Bate said, "Although we do not comment on internal deliberations involving member states, project execution in Haiti is often delayed in the face of institutional challenges. The IDB has worked with the Haitian government and other stakeholders to address such issues. Indeed the IDB has remained continually engaged in Haiti during the toughest political and economic circumstances." Most recently the bank's interactions with the Haitian state would have had to be with "other stakeholders," because Haiti doesn't have a government.

It has a president, Rene Preval, but the legislature has thwarted his attempts to install a prime minister to run the country (see NotiCen 2008-04-17 and 2008-05-15). Preval's third pick, Michele Pierre-Louis, is a respected educator known for her work with youth and the poor. She is not part of Preval's, or any other, political base, which could work to her advantage in securing legislative approval. Pierre-Louis is executive president of Fondation Connaissance et Liberte (FOKAL), an independent educational and cultural agency funded by George Soros' Open Society Institute.

The lack of a government does not necessarily mean no one is responsible for the water situation. "Although the Haitian government is the primary guarantor of rights in Haiti, the international community is not without obligations," said Margaret Satterthwaite, faculty director at CHRGI. "The states that make up the international community have a duty not to harm or undermine human rights including through their actions as members of international financial institutions.

In this case, the international community effectively crippled the Haitian government's ability to fulfill one of the most basic subsistence rights due to all people the right to water." Varma of the RFK Center said of the parties that were caught out, "To keep history from repeating itself, the IDB and the US government must take responsibility for their actions and put in place transparency and oversight mechanisms to guarantee that the human rights of the people of Haiti and other IDB member states will not be violated by an institution mandated to support their economic and social development."

-- End --