MINUSTAH Lingers On in Haiti, Despite Calls for It to Leave and Despite Reduction in Its Numbers

George Rodríguez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
MINUSTAH Lingers On in Haiti, Despite Calls for It to Leave and Despite Reduction in Its Numbers

by George Rodriguez
Category/Department: Haiti
Published: 2013-10-03

The second ousting of then President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, whom the US whisked away on board a plane in the midst of a rebellion led by the opposition Front pour la Libération et la Recontsruction Nationales (FRLN) in 2004 (NotiCen, March 4, 2004), brought an international peace-keeping force to Haiti (NotiCen, June 3, 2004).

Thus, the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (MINUSTAH) settled in this French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean island nation, a former French colony whose people became independent in 1804 and founded the world's first black republic.

Political instability led MINUSTAH to stay on, a presence whose need was strengthened by the magnitude 7.0 earthquake in January 2010 (NotiSur, Jan. 21, 2010). The quake worsened the extreme poverty that has chronically hit the approximately 9.7 million Haitians, whose country borders the Dominican Republic, its also critically impoverished Spanish-speaking neighbor on the eastern half of the island of Hispaniola.

The mission’s name answers to Haiti’s urgent need for action to, among other aims, dramatically strengthen governance, implement a vetting process in the Police Nationale d’Haïti (PNd’H), and make sure public institutions and services function properly.

But local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as Haitian citizens, accuse the mission of not only failing to fulfill its duties but of worsening Haitians’ problems.

UN sued for damages from cholera outbreak

UN Blue Helmets in Haiti are held responsible for sexual abuse of women and girls and for the cholera epidemic, which has claimed more than 8,000 lives and sickened hundreds of thousands more since it broke out some nine months after the quake (NotiCen, Nov. 18, 2010).

Mission military have been charged with—and some have been convicted of—rape and have launched violent operations in neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital, including the densely populated and highly impoverished Cité Soleil near the Aeroport Internatinal Toussaint Louverture—named after the freed slave who became the first military leader in the slave rebellion that led to the country’s independence in 1804.

Nepalese MINUSTAH troops have been specifically singled out as having started the cholera outbreak in this country, 78% of whose people miraculously survive on less than US$2 a day. The epidemic was traced back to the mission force’s barracks where Nepalese troops were stationed, near the town of Mirebalais, some 60 km northeast of Port-au-Prince, on the Artibonite River, the country’s largest. In turn, the cholera strain in Mirebalais was traced back to Nepal, according to different accounts (NotiCen, March 28, 2013).
In November 2011, the Boston-based human rights organization Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti (IJDH) and the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (BAI), its local affiliate, decided to file claims for compensation on behalf of some 5,000 victims of the epidemic.

The UN reacted in February of this year stating that, based on the immunity included in the Convention on Privileges and Immunities it approved in 1946, the world body could not receive the victims’ claim.

**UN secretary-general defends MINUSTAH**

In his latest report in August this year, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon implicitly countered allegations made against MINUSTAH by providing data on what the official presented as effective action by the mission as well as an effort by the world body to counter the cholera epidemic.

The document covering the five-month period from 8 March to 20 August 2013—the period between the pervious and the latest reports— "outlines activities undertaken by the Mission in line with its mandate under" twelve resolutions by the UN Security Council in the 2004-2012 period, the secretary-general said.

Among other points, the UN official said that "the rule-of-law indicators project facilitated by MINUSTAH has provided a baseline against which progress can be measured in strengthening key rule-of-law institutions such as the police, justice, and corrections systems."

Regarding UN troops, the secretary-general said that "during the reporting period, the military component of MINUSTAH continued to fulfill its primary mission of maintaining a secure and stable environment, in addition to enabling the delivery of humanitarian assistance and preparing for disaster response. Several security operations were conducted in accordance with the established procedure."

"The MINUSTAH military and police components maintained their presence in camps for the internally displaced and in fragile, urban communities prone to crime where women and children are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence," the secretary-general added.

On the sensitive issue of UN troop behavior, Ban said, "The Conduct and Discipline Unit continued to implement the integrated strategy to prevent misconduct through training sessions for 1,074 MINUSTAH personnel. Specific training of trainers on the prevention of misconduct, in particular sexual exploitation and abuse, was also delivered to military and police commanders."

The UN official added, "The Mission leadership consistently delivered a strong message to all staff members to maintain the highest standards of conduct at all times, both inside and outside the Mission area, while on duty and off duty."

And on the also sensitive health issue, Ban highlighted "United Nations ongoing efforts to eliminate the cholera epidemic" and said that the UN "has continued to support the Government efforts to prevent and treat the disease in line with the initiative of the Secretary-General to support the national plan for the elimination of cholera, launched in February 2013."

"A cholera vaccination campaign … was carried out to immunize approximately 112,000 people in the highest risk areas. The budget of the national plan for the elimination of cholera amounts to US $443.7 million for the period 2013-2015," Ban reported.
The secretary-general also reported that, in line with a Security Council resolution of last year, "the military and police components completed the mandated reduction of their personnel during the reporting period. By 30 June 2013, a total of 1,070 military personnel had been withdrawn, resulting in a total authorized strength of 6,270 troops. Likewise, the number of MINUSTAH police has been reduced by 640 to an authorized strength of 2,601 officers, including 50 correction officers."

"The ongoing reconfiguration of MINUSTAH has also resulted in the downscaling of 10 regional headquarters to 5 regional offices and 5 smaller departmental (provincial) offices, with a view to further consolidating the latter in fiscal year 2015-2016," Ban said. "I recommend that the Security Council consider a further reduction of the Mission authorized military strength from 6,270 to 5,021 through a balanced withdrawal of 1,249 infantry and engineering personnel by June 2014."

The most recent extension to the mission’s mandate is scheduled to end on Oct. 15.

**Calls continue for MINUSTAH to leave Haiti**

Despite the favorable image depicted by the secretary-general, documented allegations have not ceased to surface, and calls, both local and international, for MINUSTAH’s withdrawal from Haiti are ongoing.

Such evidence includes Harvard-released research in 2011 by a group of Canadian and US doctors, human rights advocates, journalists, and public health experts reviewing what is described as human rights abuses by MINUSTAH.

"Human rights violations perpetrated by the force include sexual violence, violent responses to political protests, and the introduction of cholera into Haiti followed by the failure to accept responsibility or offer adequate resources for cholera treatment, prevention, and compensation to victims’ families," said a statement by the group on the results of their research. "Beyond these direct abuses, MINUSTAH has also violated its mandate through failure to protect the internally displaced from forced evictions and gender-based violence, poor security coordination, and lack of communication with Haitian groups."

More recently, local and international grassroots organizations have further pointed out that MINUSTAH is not in Haiti to carry out its official task but to actually look after transnational economic interests. More than thirty Haitian and international groups met in Port-au-Prince to mark the ninth anniversary of MINUSTAH’s arrival and to condemn what they described, in their June 1 declaration, as the mission’s military invasion of this Caribbean nation.

"Exactly 9 years ago, on 1 June 2004, military troops of the MINUSTAH ... invaded the country under the pretext of restoring ‘stability,’" they said in the document. "Quite the opposite. Instead of improving the situation created by the 2004 coup, MINUSTAH managed to increase the level of violence inflicted on a people deprived of all its rights, protecting an oppressive system resting on semi-slavery work relations, where unemployment blights 70% of the economically active population and wages are at inhuman levels."

Thus, they demanded "the immediate withdrawal of MINUSTAH and all foreign troops from Haitian soil; the end of the economic occupation and the plunder, ... recognition of the crimes committed by MINUSTAH, in particular the introduction of cholera, punishment for those responsible, and compensation for the country's victims."
"MINUSTAH has failed miserably to achieve the goals set out by the United Nations Security Council, the only objective accomplished being the military occupation of the country on behalf of interests that are not those of the Haitian people," the groups warned.

The organizations further said, "MINUSTAH has only remained in place through the military and diplomatic support of Canada, the United States, and France, at the service of their transnational businesses and the free trade and investment agreements that benefit them."

"The Haitian Senate had courageously voted against two American and Canadian mining companies entering the country, companies that are now plundering rich deposits of gold, copper, and silver in the 'poorest country,' under MINUSTAH's protection," the groups said. "Haiti does not need military troops, or MINUSTAH. ... Haiti needs to get rid of the hands and boots that dominate it. Haiti needs doctors, sanitation workers, educators, engineers, technicians, all at the service of the reconstruction demanded by the Haitian people."

Also on June 1, the Final Resolution of the Continental Conference in Haiti for the Withdrawal of UN-MINUSTAH Troops, a 140-delegate meeting held in the Haitian capital, addressed "the governments of Latin America and the Caribbean" and "all governments involved in the occupation of Haiti."

"The only measure consistent with the sovereignty of the Haitian people and the Haitian nation is the immediate withdrawal of UN-MINUSTAH troops from Haiti! It is now, right now, that each and every government can and must decide to withdraw its troops. Not one more day for MINUSTAH in Haiti!" they said in the resolution that was unanimously approved.

Participants in the gathering also called on countries to "vote at the UN against the renewal of the presence of MINUSTAH in Haiti" and to "show your solidarity with the Haitian people by demanding UN compensation/reparations for the victims of cholera," and they said that "to defend Haiti is to defend ourselves!"

-- End --