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Canada's Role in the Crisis in Haiti

By Kevin Skerrett

ZNet, March 12, 2004

This past weekend, the elected President of Haiti, Jean Bertrand Aristide, left office under circumstances that we will only come to understand in

the coming days and weeks. The recent history has been on the front pages: Faced with a February 5th armed insurrection led by ex-death squad killers and veterans of the disbanded Haitian army, Aristide began losing his grasp on significant parts of the country. Despite his increasingly frantic pleas for assistance from governments that have always recognized the legitimacy of his government, Aristide was completely abandoned by the US and French governments. His "resignation", which increasingly appears to have been a fraud, came on Sunday, February 29th, and provides a moment for progressives, especially in Canada, the United States, and France, to stake stock of the role of our own governments in this affair.

The stage for the recent endgame was set a little over a week ago by the "peace" agreement reached on Saturday, February 21st, with the involvement of US, Canada, the OAS, and CARICOM. The agreement required of Aristide the nomination of a new Prime Minister and the establishment of a new multi-party governing council, to be composed of representatives from the political opposition. Aristide immediately accepted the deal, and then by Tuesday, the armed "rebel" groups (this is the media's term for the convicted killers set on a coup d'état) rejected the "peace" deal outright, because Aristide's resignation was not a part of it.

With this "veto" exercised by the unelected opposition, the stalemate returned and the governments of France and the US, who never liked Aristide, unveiled what now appears to be the unstated policy all along. Colin Powell and French Foreign Minister de Villepin began inviting the resignation by Wednesday, and by Friday, Canada followed suit. Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham suggested Aristide should "look at his responsibilities toward his people and say: 'Look, it would be better that...I leave.'"

With Aristide's apparent resignation on Sunday, Canada's Foreign Minister Bill Graham, and Prime Minister Paul Martin, now have their wish. But by chiming in their agreement with the US/France position, Canada has turned its back on its more independent foreign policy, particularly regarding Haiti, despite it being a country that "Canada has traditionally considered one of its key areas of foreign-policy expertise."

The given rationale for this shift has been the outrageously distorted and incomplete picture of Haiti

drawn by the Associated Press - the dominant source of Canadian news coverage, incorporated deeply into reporting from assigned correspondents such as the Globe's Paul Knox and Canwest's Sue Montgomery. That picture, and the story underneath, is a cartoon of civil strife in a desperately poor country, confusing and unexplained political divisions, an "embattled" recalcitrant leader, and the supposedly "humanitarian" role of the international community - the US and Canada in particular. These muddled images are then sharply accented by the ugly, racist tinge found in the commentary from far-right cold warriors such as Canwest's George Jonas. In his only recent column devoted to Haiti, he drew an odious comparison of watching events in Haiti to watching "a pack of hyenas fighting over a carcass," - an analogy never made, as far as I know, with the strife in Northern Ireland.

This ugly picture was further poisoned on Saturday by Ottawa Citizen columnist David Warren, who sneered on Saturday that despite past colonial efforts to civilize and democratize the country, "no real progress has been made in creating a people who are susceptible to self-government." For Warren, and no small number of the mainstream "expert" Haiti-watchers, this is the problem - the people themselves. And the people, in this case, are black.

The US-led Aid and Development Loan Embargo

It does not take much digging to discover that this picture not only incorporates racist assumptions about economic and political "development", but also profoundly simplistic. For example, while regularly commenting on Haiti's profound poverty, and on Aristide's supposed "failure to deliver the goods" that he promised, nowhere in the Canadian press can we find a serious examination of the financial strangulation imposed on Haiti through the four-year US/EU aid and loan embargo. This devastating policy has stalled some \$650 million promised through the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and other sources since 2000, and to varying degrees prior to that. The human rights group MADRE points out that the US froze transfers designed to "pay for safe drinking water, literacy programs and health services." In effect, this embargo has starved the Aristide government of promised, crucial, life-saving funds, and transformed development finance and humanitarian aid into a vicious political weapon - not very differently from the sanctions that destroyed the social infrastructure of Iraq in the 1990s. A similar humanitarian catastrophe has been brewing in Haiti, with few in the "civilized West" (or North) either noticing, or really caring much.

The rationale for this US embargo draws from a dispute over Aristide's democratic legitimacy - the elections of 2000. The Associated Press, and the right-wing Aristide haters from both the Republican party and the media, sloppily refer to "sham", "rigged", or "fraudulent" elections of that year. Canadian reporting has been only

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Focus on the Colombia situation.

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WHAT WE BELIEVE

CANDIL promotes global human security through a culture of peace, active democracy and respect for international law. Our vision is global; our strategy is local.

PRINCIPLES

Necessity of International Law for Global Peace and Security

International law is essential for global peace and security, including the peace and security of Canadians. As citizens of Canada, we are expected to obey the law; we expect the same standard of behavior from our government. The government of Canada, and all Canadian political parties, must comply with the fundamental requirements, principles, and purposes of international law, and give international law decisive weight in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy.

Lessons from Iraq

Western policy toward Iraq has contributed to a humanitarian and human rights disaster in that country, and has violated international law, including the law of the UN Charter, international humanitarian law, and international human rights law. The errors and violations of our Iraq policy must be made explicit and used as lessons for constructive change in the direction of Canada's foreign policy, to avoid similarly destructive and costly errors in the future, both in Iraq and in other parts of the world.

Democracy and Responsible Citizenship

A critical, informed, active citizenry is a fundamental requirement of democracy. Citizens are ultimately responsible for the public policy of their government. Citizens of Canada are responsible for compliance of Canadian foreign policy with the law of the United Nations Charter, international humanitarian law, and international human rights law. Familiarity with the basic principles and purposes of international law is an indispensable part of education for responsible citizenship.

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marginally better, referring more often to "flawed" 2000 elections, and then providing a quote from the political opposition complaining of fraud and corruption. No one in the mainstream North American press has taken the simple step of explaining the actual nature of the dispute, nor the efforts of President Aristide and his government to resolve it.

There are, however, a number of independent and credible sources that provide this information, including the group MADRE quoted above, the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), TransAfrica Forum, the Democratic Black Caucus, and several writers for Z Magazine. In summary, the disputed elections were actually the senatorial elections of May, 2000, that had followed years of previous electoral disputes and boycotts. MADRE point out that in 17 of the 18 contested Senatorial districts, Aristide's Lavalas Family party candidates were declared the winner, when in fact the method of calculating the winners in 8 of the 18 contested districts (on a plurality, rather than majority basis) was incorrect.

In response, Aristide asked for the resignations of the senators involved, and attempted to establish a new electoral commission, but was stonewalled by an opposition that simply continued to demand his resignation - and continued to do so ever since, with US encouragement, funding, and support. The November 2000 presidential elections were boycotted by the major opposition groups, which meant that Aristide won them handily - and was recognized as the democratically elected leader by President Clinton and the rest of the international community. Nonetheless, the newly "elected" Bush administration, no stranger to electoral counting disputes themselves, exercised a grotesque hypocrisy by using the controversy as an excuse for a full aid and loan embargo.

What has been the Canadian government's response to this US policy? Interestingly, Canada's Haiti policy has had similarities with its policy on Cuba. In the face of the US-led (EU supported) embargo, Canada has quietly maintained an ongoing bilateral aid relationship with the Aristide government, disbursing over \$18 million in 2001/2002. Of course, such modest efforts are likely to have been more than undermined by the embargo - yet this has yet to be mentioned by any Canadian politicians, or the press. This utter failure to exercise moral leadership and independence by exposing the criminal behaviour of the US and shedding light on the nature of this electoral dispute has now drawn international criticism. The Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) has been one of the few truly independent voices on Haiti, and has condemned Graham for "dragging Canada back to its traditional roost of 'me-tooism' when it comes to U.S.-sponsored initiatives." In their analysis of the election dispute, they point out that, contrary to the Canadian suggestion that President Aristide has not lived up to his commitments,

...Aristide has accepted every condition pressed upon him by CARICOM, the US and the OAS. The bedrock problem regarding Haiti is that the country's opposition refuses to negotiate with Aristide and will not consider

taking up their seat on the Provisional Electoral Council, without which no elections can be held.

Interestingly, the generally anti-Aristide National Post ran a column that admitted that whatever the "dubious" character of the 2000 elections, "few doubt [Aristide] would have won them anyway". The writer notes that direct intervention aimed at "forcing him from office would look a lot like a putsch against a legitimate leader." Of course, this helps us to understand the financial strangulation strategy. The Canadian media has chosen to ignore all of this, presumably because it muddies the simpler picture of Haiti described above - and suggests the possibility of different, perhaps less humanitarian motives behind US and Canadian policy.

Who is the "democratic opposition" in Haiti?

To date, the mainstream has offered scanty detail about the character, leadership, and political orientation of the supposed "democratic opposition" to Aristide (as opposed to the armed thugs). One important branch of the opposition movement, the Group 184 that is often quoted on the CBC and in the Associated Press, is led by the American sweatshop owner André Apaid, and he and the various elements of his "Democratic Convergence" have long been beneficiaries of direct financial and diplomatic support from the US and France. Neither country ever liked or trusted Aristide's leftwing populism, his demand for reparations from France, or his 1996 decision to extend diplomatic recognition to Cuba. They and the other groups comprising the Democratic Platform are largely derived from the small, lighter-skinned Haitian ruling elite that dominated Haiti under the notorious Duvalier dictatorships. Many were also directly involved in the military coup that unseated Aristide in 1991, following the landslide election win that brought him 67% of the vote. It is worth remembering that the US-supported candidate, World Bank economist Marc Bazin, received only 14% of the vote that year. None of us should be surprised if Bazin, who once served as finance minister under "Baby Doc" Duvalier, and who understand "economics", is once again dragged out as a possible replacement for Aristide within the next few weeks.

Having said this, it is important to recognize that there has been growing disaffection with Aristide, and in recent weeks some leaders of popular organizations that were either past supporters or politically neutral began to join in the opposition call for his resignation. This is hardly surprising, given that one of the conditions of his reinstatement by US troops in 1994 was the abandonment of his populist and redistributive program, and the acceptance of a World Bank/IMF structural adjustment package. These neoliberal policies included requirements of layoffs of government employees, austerity measures, and devastating cuts to the tariff structure protecting Haiti's relatively efficient rice industry. At the same time, it appears as though Aristide has attempted to retain some elements of a redistributive program. As MADRE argues,

Aristide has tried to walk a line between US demands for neoliberal reforms and his own commitment to a

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progressive economic agenda. As a result, he has lost favour with parts of his own political base and Haitian and US elites.

When this incendiary brew of discontent caught fire in recent weeks, many quite understandably began to say "enough". Moreover, there has unquestionably been documented human rights problems, reports from the ICFTU of attacks on "opposition" trade unionists (i.e. those working with the opposition to force Aristide's resignation), and other reports that progressives will rightly abhor. Aristide has much to answer for, to be sure. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that when a qualitatively higher level of abuses are carried by regimes favoured by the White House (Colombia, Turkey, the list could go on), the response is to send the government more weapons.

Canadian workers know the wrenching effects of so-called "free trade" policies, and the unemployment and dislocation they bring. But bringing these same free market policies to the poorest nation in the hemisphere, and then compounding them with a crushing aid and loan embargo (on a government with an annual budget of some \$300 million US), was simply murderous. Paul Farmer, an American doctor who has worked in Haiti for many years, wrote last year that the "embargo has targeted the northern hemisphere's most vulnerable population, the poorest people with the most fragile economy, ecology and society." The need for improvements, he reports, is desperate, given that "there are only 1.2 doctors, 1.3 nurses, and 0.4 dentists for every 10,000 Haitians...And 40% of people have no access to any primary healthcare, while HIV and tuberculosis rates are by far the highest in Latin America." Of course, genuinely attempting to address these problems through the state would violate the usual World Bank/IMF proscriptions against public services and social expenditure. What feeble efforts he has made to balance the impact of IMF austerity have him frequently dismissed by writers in the Wall Street Journal as a "crazy Marxist."

Regardless, Aristide had no money with which to attempt such programs anyway, and Canada's feeble, quiet bilateral efforts have been more than undone by the great "partner" with whom we seek "deeper integration." Of course, neither Bill Graham nor Paul Martin have ever mentioned any of this publicly, nor should we expect them to very soon. There is a missile defense program to be joined, and a new Prime Minister wanting desperately to rebuild our pre-Iraq camaraderie.



So gradually, the murky media picture begins to clarify - regime change by social collapse. The suggestion has, in fact, been made. Many Canadians would probably be surprised to learn that Congresswoman Barbara Lee (of the Congressional Black Caucus, not coincidentally) has spent years denouncing what the Bush government's policy of financial strangulation, arguing that the "administration has decided to leverage political change in a member country by embargoing loans that the [Inter-american Development] Bank has a contractual obligation to disburse." Interestingly, presidential candidate John Kerry offered further elaboration last week when he was asked about the motivation behind the Bush Administration's punishing Haiti policy. "They hate Aristide", he answered, in a meeting with the editors of the New York Times. Going one step further, Kerry unveils more bluntly what he thinks has really happened, suggesting that the Bush White House "sort of created the environment within which the insurgency could grow, take root."

History Doomed to Repeat?

The story unfolding reveals much about the latest "new world order", the neoliberal ice-age in with which our movements for global justice are struggling. The people of Haiti have suffered from a rising crescendo of violence, deepening poverty, and anti-democratic manipulation that is following a much longer process of imposing the one economic model that Washington

will accept. Clearly, in spite of repeated compromises and the acceptance of the bulk of US demands, Aristide was never going to be trusted as long as there was any glimmer of the left-populist reformer first elected by a landslide. Painful as it is to watch, there are many lessons to be learned.

We might also take this opportunity to recall obvious previous parallels, such as the US-sponsored terror campaign of the 1980s against the similarly left-populist Sandinista government of Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega. After years of "contra" rebel terror, the population of Nicaragua cried "uncle" and voted the Sandinistas out in 1990. Other examples of regime change in Latin America abound: Panama, 1990; Chile, 1973; Guatemala, 1954. More recently, the US moved quickly to try to provide support for the similarly anti-democratic coup against the left-populist Hugo Chavez of Venezuela in April, 2002 - but were embarrassed to discover (again) the depth of Chavez' popular support. There appears more reason than ever to watch these developments in Haiti carefully, never keeping our eyes too far from the continuing struggle in Venezuela, and - the real prize for Bush - Cuba.

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What you can do to become a more responsible citizen.

- 1. Educate yourself.** Check out alternative news websites and join CANDIL or a similar group.
- 2. Contact your MP or MLA** on issues that you feel they should be addressing.
- 3. Make your voice heard!** Send your letters, commentaries, etc. to editors.

"An immoral war was thus waged and the world is a great deal less safe place than before. There are many more who resent the powerful who can throw their weight about so callously and with so much impunity."

– Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Toussaint L'Ouverture (née Breda) was a self educated slave in Saint-Dominique (now Haiti). In 1789, French Revolution moderates applied the "Rights of Man" to free Blacks and Mulattoes. They retracted the measure in 1791 due to pressure from plantation owners. This sparked mass slave revolts in Saint Dominique. Toussaint became the rebel leader and brilliantly led his army to victory over the French, Spanish and British.

In 1793, the Jacobins controlled France and ended slavery in its colonies. The freed slaves agreed to help the French expel the English and Spanish from Saint Dominique. Toussaint led his army to win seven battles in seven days. Everywhere he lifted the French flag, he proclaimed freedom for all Blacks. He became the de facto governor of Haiti.

In 1794, the Jacobins lost power and slavery returned to the colonies. The result in Haiti was another war. In 1803, Napoleon and Toussaint agreed to terms of peace: Haiti became the first independent state in Latin America. Six months later, Toussaint was invited to France. When he arrived, he was arrested. Napoleon ordered that Toussaint be placed in a prison dungeon in the mountains, and murdered by means of cold, starvation, and neglect. Toussaint died in prison, but others carried on the fight for freedom.

Cajoled or Abducted? Mystery of Aristide's Final Hours.

By Gary Younge and Sibylla Brodzinsky in Port-au-Prince

The Guardian
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to exile when the US diplomat Luis Moreno tapped on his window.

"Mr President, with all due respect, the plane is 20 minutes away, I really need the letter," Mr Moreno said, meaning Mr Aristide's letter of resignation. Mr Aristide then pulled an envelope from his wife's purse, as she sat stonily by his side.

Once its contents were confirmed, Mr Moreno apologised to Mr Aristide and his wife. "I said I was very sorry to see things end this way," he said. Mr Aristide replied in English: "Well, that's life." About an hour later he was gone, zig-zagging the skies in search of asylum and finally landing in the Central African Republic.

This, at least, is the United States' official version of Mr Aristide's last hours as told by Mr Moreno, a career diplomat who has been in Haiti for the past two and a half years.

Mr Aristide's account could not be more different. He says he was abducted, forced by the US to leave his own country at gunpoint.

A large number of US agents arrived at his official residence, he says. "They came at night ... there were too many. I couldn't count them. [They] were telling me that if I don't leave they would start shooting and be killing in a matter of time."

Asked who had kidnapped him, he replied: "Forces, Haitian forces. They were Americans and Haitians together acting to surround the airport, my house, the palace. I was told that I better leave.

"American agents talked to me. Haitian agents talked to me. And I finally realised it was true, we were going to have bloodshed. And when I asked how many people may get killed, they said thousands may get killed. So [they were] using that kind of force to lead a coup d'etat."

What truly happened during the former Haitian president's final hours in office has become almost as controversial as what he did in his decade in power.

American officials and the exiled Haitian leader give conflicting accounts of events leading up to his dramatic flight from Port-au-Prince

Jean-Bertrand Aristide was sitting in his car on the tarmac at Port-au-Prince airport early on Sunday morning waiting for the plane to take him

The political vacuum left by his departure remains unfilled. The rebel leaders, who have merged with the police, claim to have secured military control. Opposition leaders have refused to negotiate with Mr Aristide's prime minister, Yvon Neptune, about forming a new government.

After the rebel leader, Guy Philippe, said he intended to have Mr Neptune arrested on corruption charges, a rebel group converged on the prime minister's official residence, from which he had to be rescued by US marines.

The deposed dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier has announced that he intends to return as soon as possible, although he added that seeking the presidency was "not on my agenda".

Louis-Jodel Chamblain, a convicted killer who led army death squads and is accused of ordering hundreds of executions, has demanded a voice in the new political settlement. "What's mine is mine," he said.

In the Central African Republic, where Mr Aristide is staying at the official residence of President François Bozize, the government has asked him to refrain from claiming that he was kidnapped for fear of an international incident.

The official US position is that Mr Aristide's claim is absurd. Mr Moreno says he arrived at Mr Aristide's home accompanied only by an embassy political officer and the US security guards, sent by the US ambassador, James Foley, to collect a letter. When he

said "I understand you have a letter for me", Mr Aristide replied: "I give you my word, I will give you the letter. You know what my word means to me. You know I always keep my word."

He told Mr Aristide he could hand over the letter when they got to the airport, but that they had better leave quickly, because "the situation was getting bad". "He was not kidnapped," the US secretary of state, Colin Powell, said. "We did not force him on to the airplane. He went on to the airplane willingly, and that's the truth."

While it is unlikely that Mr Aristide was led to the airport in handcuffs, it is equally disingenuous to suggest that his departure was in any way voluntary. In either case it is significant that he resigned to the US rather than to the chief supreme court justice, his constitutional successor.

The fact that the day before he fled he vowed to remain and fight, and that he left without any clear destination in mind, suggests that he left in a hurry. A US official said Mr Aristide had asked whether some of the 50 marines President Bush had sent a week earlier to protect the US embassy might go to the presidential palace if the rebels drew close. The answer was no. With no army to protect him, he had few options.

