



In June, 800 more troops were added to UN stabilisation mission in Haiti, bringing the number of soldiers to a total of 7,500. But with the situation only deteriorating since the UN troops arrived over one year ago, are more soldiers the answer? Photo courtesy of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti.

Military approach criticised

Haitian civil society organisations are criticising the latest proposals to deal with continuing violence in many districts of the capital, Port-au-Prince. In June, the United Nations increased the size of its mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), adding 800 more soldiers and 275 more police. Meanwhile, reports from Washington suggest that the US will look favourably on the interim government's request to purchase weapons costing US\$1.9 million. The purchase will secure over 3,000 pistols, rifles and shotguns, as well as tear-gas grenades and launchers, for use by the Haitian police force.

Political and gang violence since the beginning of October 2004 has claimed the lives of as many as 1,000 people, and wounded thousands more. If this was not bad enough, a new form of terror has developed at a frightening pace over recent months. Hundreds of people have been kidnapped for ransom

money – sometimes as little as US\$30.

But for Guy Delva, head of the Haitian Journalists' Association, the solution to the violence is not a military one. He said, "We have to find a way so that those with weapons don't have a reason to use them anymore. It is not a question of more troops. You could have 20,000 of them, but there is still no way they could be present in every corner of this city, let alone the whole country."

Camille Chalmers, director of the Alternative Development Advocacy Platform, (PAPDA), agrees that sending more soldiers won't resolve anything. "We don't have a military problem. There is no war in Haiti." Chalmers goes further, stating that, "Violence happens with or without MINUSTAH, and sometimes they even help the police attack people...Insecurity is worse today than it was one year ago."

Some human rights workers be-

lieve that the drive to arm the police force is also a mistake, particularly in light of allegations that some police officers have been carrying out extra-judicial executions of suspected pro-Aristide activists.

For Rose-Anne Auguste, who runs a women's health and sex education centre in a poor district in the south of the capital, the only way to deal with gang violence is to address the extreme socio-economic situation facing the majority of the population. "Young people growing up in Carrefour-Feuilles are good people, creative people, but after five or ten years with no economic development and no prospect of being able to improve their lives, they will

inevitably become *chimères* (gangsters)."

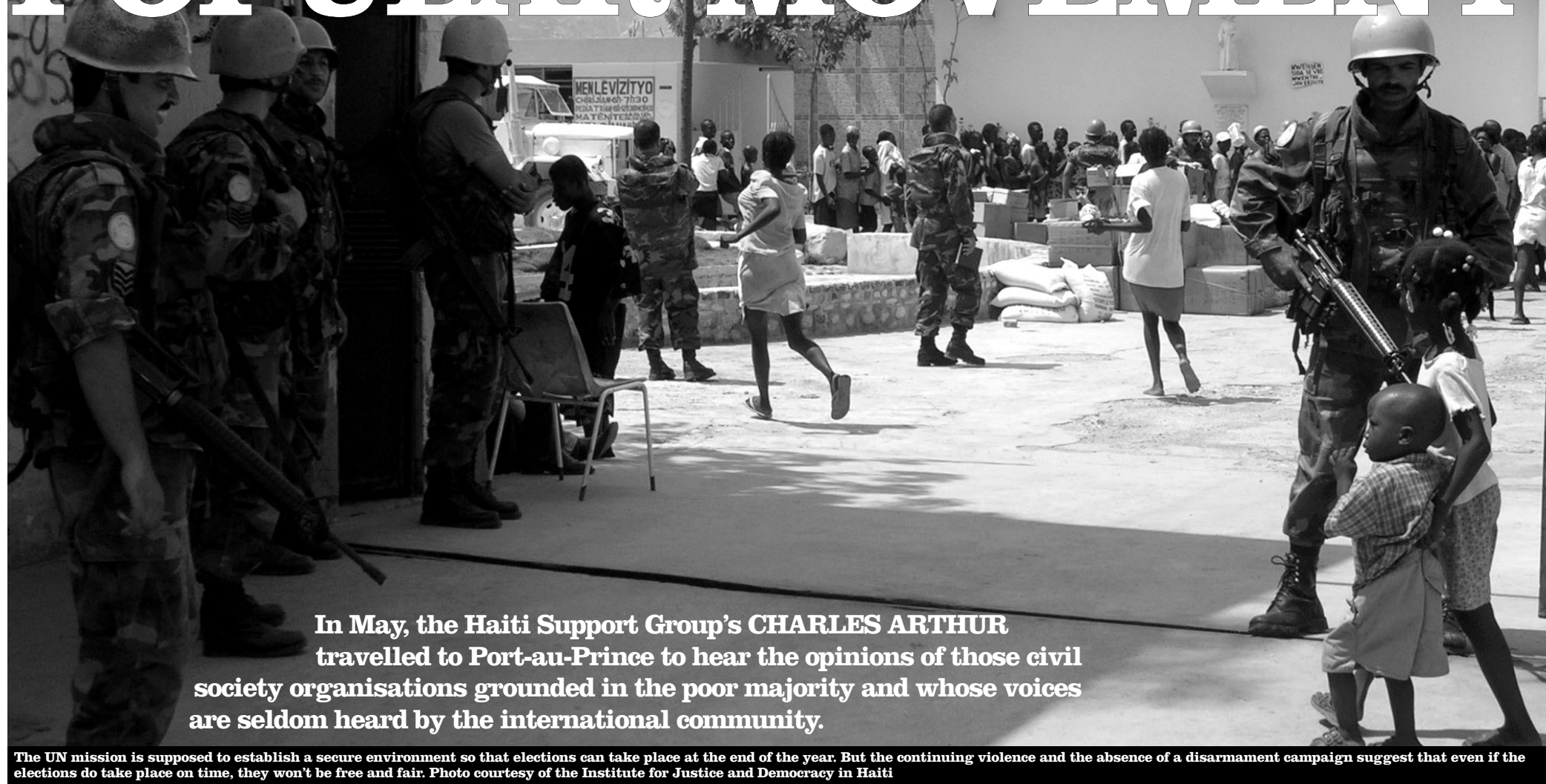
More immediately, Chalmers and others are promoting national dialogue as the only solution to the violence and insecurity. "We need a genuine national dialogue...to look at the country's real problems - the economy and the political institutions."

Guy Delva agrees that a complex situation cannot be resolved by using more weapons. "What is needed is a political approach. The first step is to have a real dialogue to talk about the problems experienced by the poor."

He rejects the attempts of many of the country's political leaders and a number of powerful local media outfits to characterise all the inhabitants of poor areas as gangsters. "Thousands of people take part in demonstrations against the interim government, but there are not thousands of gangsters. The people in the slums feel neglected."

"We need a genuine national dialogue to look at the country's real problems."

REBUILDING THE POPULAR MOVEMENT



In May, the Haiti Support Group's CHARLES ARTHUR travelled to Port-au-Prince to hear the opinions of those civil society organisations grounded in the poor majority and whose voices are seldom heard by the international community.

The UN mission is supposed to establish a secure environment so that elections can take place at the end of the year. But the continuing violence and the absence of a disarmament campaign suggest that even if the elections do take place on time, they won't be free and fair. Photo courtesy of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti

Camille Chalmers, head of the Alternative Development Advocacy Platform (PADPA), believes that there is no prospect of meaningful elections by the end of 2005. "They can make elections – controlled by the foreign forces, but there won't be a strong participation by the popular sector."

This is a view shared by other progressive activists. Sony Esteus, who works for SAKS, a NGO supporting community radio stations run by peasant groups and grassroots organisations, said, "For the majority of people, elections are not a priority today. People are not interested. If candidates were to appear in their areas, they would just laugh."

Guy Numa, a student activist and a member of the Popular Democratic Movement (MODEP), explained that the established political parties are regarded with disdain by ordinary people. "The masses don't believe

elections will bring improvements because the candidates are the same old people that they don't trust. Those who will be elected will just ensure continuity, and enforce neo-liberal plans and therefore poverty."

Mobilising for change

Progressive organisers are instead increasing their cooperation in an effort to rebuild the country's once vibrant popular movement for radical change. They admit this is an extremely difficult task, but are adamant that Haiti's current descent into violence and economic collapse can only be stopped if the country's poor majority mobilises.

Josué Vaval, a leader of the Haitian Autonomous Students' Movement (MEGA), told *Haiti Briefing*, "We have to build a movement to unite people to demand respect for human rights, and we mean the rights to eat, to send our children to school, and to have electricity."

MODEP's Numa admits the situation is ex-

tremely difficult but says, "Some people are still active, and we are encouraging them to organise themselves. But the poverty here is extreme, and people have no time to even think about tomorrow."

Marc-Arthur Fils-Aimé is the director of the Karl Lévêque Cultural Institute (ICKL), a research and education centre that seeks to improve cooperation between democratic institutions and popular organisations. He says, "We are working on economic solidarity with a number of peasant organisations, because people are living at a level of poverty that stops them from being able to even think... They must spend all their time trying to find something to eat."

Fils-Aimé and PADPA's Chalmers agree that progressive organising is also hampered by generalised disillusionment with the performance of the interim government. Chalmers says, "This is a government composed of total lackeys to the United States. It has no social

programme, and no interest in the peasantry or in listening to the people in the poor neighbourhoods."

Urban poor want to move on

In response to this situation, a number of organisations are working together to try and solidify and strengthen the country's once strong peasant movement. But SAKS' Sony Esteus recognises that as well as helping the peasant movement, he and his colleagues must also reach out to the urban poor. He says, "There are many organisations in those areas that we used to work with. They were persecuted under Aristide, and now they can't be active because of the gangs."

Judy DaCruz is an independent human rights monitor who regularly visits the lawless and poverty-stricken Port-au-Prince slum areas. She confirms that people living there do want to organise themselves to address their common problems. "People in Bel-

Air and Cité Soleil want to move on, they want to organise, but they cannot because of the gangs. These gangs – some of them criminal, some of them with political motivations – unite to fight against incursions by the police and the UN."

ICKL's Fils-Aimé concedes that as well as the gangsters in Port-au-Prince slum areas who say they operate in Aristide's name, there are many people who are still genuinely attached to the ousted president and his populist discourse. However, he contends that the majority of people are deeply disappointed with the performance of Aristide's Lavalas Family government between 2000-2004.

Cost of living protests

Fils-Aimé says that a population that is not organised cannot change its situation, but he hopes that initiatives such as the recent campaign against the high cost of living will set things in motion. "The population is following it with interest. Now we have to get them involved. We have to separate them from the gangs."

Since the beginning of May, students from the State University have joined other progressive activists in staging weekly sit-ins outside the Ministry of Commerce. The protesters have been denouncing the recent increases in petrol and diesel that, they say, are making life impossible for small merchants and others who use public transport. The sit-ins also aim to force the interim government to intervene to reverse recent price rises for maize, rice, beans, cooking oil and charcoal.

Students to the fore

As well as taking part in the Ministry of Commerce sit-ins, students from the State University have also taken their protests onto the streets. On 11 May, several hundred students marched through the streets of Port-au-Prince to protest outside the Prime Minister's office. "We've been watching this government, and it's not doing anything," said Wisley Joseph, a communications student. "So, we are back on the streets."

One group – students from the Social Science faculty – also voiced their frustration with the country's privileged elite, and denounced students from the University's Business Studies (INAGHEI) faculty for maintaining the links forged with private sector leaders during the anti-Aristide mobilisation in late 2003.

"We no longer want to be the turkeys that get stuffed (we no longer wish to be played for fools)," chanted the Social Science faculty students, in reference to the private sector-dominated Group of 184, which they say has been using the students to protect its own class interests.

MEGA's Josué Vaval, who is a final year psychology student, said, "We realise that the majority of the population is being excluded at this time. But we are not pro-bourgeois like some other students, and we believe the poorest members of society should be included and become actors in their own history."

Union leader denounces "lavichè"

Extract from a translated transcript of radio interview with Josué Merilien, leader of the teachers' union, UNNOH, at the sit-in to protest against the high cost of living at the Ministry of Commerce, Port-au-Prince, on 27 May 2005:

Today we've all come together. We have trade unionists, there's PAPDA, MODEP, MEGA, Kay Fann, SOFA – all of us. We are united. We've come together to tell this government that we fought against the high cost of living, corruption, theft, and still the same situation remains. The cost of living has sky-rocketed. Life is harder. The suffering has amplified and none of us can eat or drink. All of us here, whether we are teachers, students, even the cops who are here, the little money they are paying us, we can't do anything with what we are getting paid.

Today we need visionaries as government officials. We need Haitians with a sense of social awareness, a social vision to run the affairs of the country. The current ones are mere pimps. Pimps working to fatten their own pockets. They are not working for the people. That is why today Haitians everywhere, in Haiti and abroad, should stand up and demand a country where we can live.

Although the country is ours, for the past 200 years we've been living with shameless bullies. A small portion of the population is satisfying its unbridled appetite, while the overwhelming majority is starving to death. It's unacceptable! We've had enough!

Today, the bourgeoisie must understand this untenable situation will not continue. Things can't go on like before. It's not acceptable that they take all the resources and let the people starve to death. For 200 years, the pie hasn't been cut right. On one side, there's a small clique that has been living large, while the rest of us have nothing.



The interim government's failure to address the majority population's struggle with grinding poverty is the focus of a campaign that hopes to galvanise people from the poorer urban neighbourhoods. For over two months now, students from the State University, together with members of trade unions and human rights groups, have staged a weekly demonstration outside the Ministry of Commerce to protest against the high cost of living.

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Campaign news

Update: Workers' organisation, Batay Ouvriye

Haiti Briefing readers will recall that in June 2004, over 350 workers employed to assemble Levi jeans were dismissed from the Grupo M factory in the CODEVI free trade zone (FTZ) because of their union activities. An international solidarity campaign helped achieve an agreement between the union, Socowa, and the CODEVI management in February 2005, but citing a shortage of jobs the management failed to reinstate those 154 workers who still wanted to return to work. However, in late March, the Levi Strauss company increased its orders by 25% and, in April, Wrangler, the daughter company of giant US-based textile company, VF Corporation, submitted new orders. By June, Batay Ouvriye, which works to support the Socowa union, reported that a second factory had opened to deal with the increase in

orders, and over 100 workers had been re-instated. A further 17 sacked workers will imminently be reinstated, leaving just 31 checkers and assistants for whom there are still no openings.

In the north-eastern border town of Ouanaminthe, where the Codevi FTZ is based, Batay Ouvriye's slender resources were stretched thin in May when the Dominican Army deported thousands of people. Many of these people – Haitians and black Dominicans – were dumped across the border from the Dominican Republic at Ouanaminthe, and Batay Ouvriye has been trying to provide what assistance it can to these destitute deportees.

In other news, a new FTZ at Drouillard, near Cité Soleil in Port-au-Prince, is nearly ready to open. However it would seem that even if the infrastructure is ready to allow assembly factories to be set up, the

continuing violence in that part of the capital will cause delays. Batay Ouvriye wants to open an office near the Drouillard FTZ so that it will be able to begin organising workers when it eventually opens for business.

Elsewhere, Batay Ouvriye is active in eight of the country's 10 administrative departments, but over the preceding year there has been a decrease in the organisation's activities, mainly as a consequence of a reduction in funding. Repression of its activists has continued, with no difference before or after the departure of President Aristide. For agricultural labourers and small farmers, the *grandons* (big landowners) are still the problem. In April, in Mare Rouge in the north west, a Batay Ouvriye meeting was attacked by agents of a *grandon* – one person was killed, and another later died of his wounds.

As UK assumes EU presidency, NGOs correspond with DfID

In May, the Haiti Support Group, together with eight other British and Irish non-governmental organisations working on Haiti, wrote a joint letter to Hilary Benn, the British government's secretary of state for international development. The letter drew attention to a number of points regarding the European Union's role in Haiti in the context of the UK's presidency of the EU between July and December.

The letter focused on four key issues that the EU needs to prioritise if its aid programme in Haiti is to have any chance of lasting success. The NGOs called on the British government to ensure that the EU:

- Prioritises security, disarmament and human rights by encouraging the United Nations mission in Haiti to enact a comprehensive reform of the Haitian police force, and to carry out a thorough disarmament process;
- Supports a genuine national dialogue process that includes civil society organisations representing the

poorest 85% of the Haitian population;

- Plans a free and fair election process;
- Involves civil society organisations in the planning and implementation of development projects.

Benn's reply

The reply from Hilary Benn, the head of the Department for International Development (DfID), fell some way short of what the HSG had hoped for, in that it gave every indication that the British government merely intends to follow the lead taken by those international players already deeply involved in Haiti. Thus, the reply stated: the UK would use its seat on the UN Security Council to support the UN mission in Haiti; within the OECD the UK would support the lead role on Haiti taken by Canada; and by virtue of its membership of the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank and IMF, the UK would continue to focus on the effective delivery of resources. As for the EU presidency, Mr Benn mentioned the

provision of election observers, and that the UK would continue "efforts to ensure that the European Community's support to Haiti is designed and delivered as *practically as possible*" (our italics).

The HSG's Charles Arthur commented, "Given the accelerating deterioration in almost every aspect of Haitian economic and political life, 'more of the same' from British government with regard to Haiti is not what is required at all. It is hard to imagine that DfID is not aware of how serious the situation in Haiti has become, yet this reply does nothing to suggest that the British government is going to use its EU presidency to try and tackle this crisis. 'Washing of hands' is the phrase that comes to mind."

Arthur continued, "Unfortunately, the reference to aid implementation and disbursement being 'practical' suggests that our original call for maximum civil society involvement has not been taken on board."