



A city under water - Gonaïves, September 2008

## Haiti's horrible year

The year started off badly, and it was downhill from then on. The fragile sense of stability that had been growing steadily since President Préal took office in mid-2006 was severely undermined by a sharp rise in the price of food and other essential items in the early months of 2008. In April, nationwide street demonstrations, some of them violent, erupted over the government's failure to address the rising cost of food. Opportunist politicians opposed to the Préal government took advantage of the crisis to vote the Prime Minister, Jacques Edouard Alexis, out of office.

While mainstream politics were paralysed following the collapse of the Alexis government, the economic situation continued in a downwards spiral. Annual inflation surged on the back of high prices for food and fuel, reaching 16% in June, up from 10% at end

of 2007. The currency, the gourde, continued to depreciate against the US dollar. Industrial output shrank, and there was a dramatic widening of the trade deficit, mainly as a result of massive increases in the prices of oil and food imports. Meanwhile, the security situation in the capital, Port-au-Prince, which had started to improve, took a turn for the worse with a new wave of kidnappings for ransom.

In early September the country emerged from months of political deadlock, and welcomed a new government led by Prime Minister, Michèle Pierre-Louis. However, just as one crisis was resolved, an-

**“Just as one crisis was resolved, another much more serious one developed”**

other much more serious one developed when the country was struck by three hurricanes and a severe tropical storm in just 30 days.

Torrential rain and flooding caused massive destruction across the country, and relief agencies estimated that nationwide some 800,000 people were left homeless and/or unable to feed themselves. There was also extensive damage to the country's rudimentary infrastructure and communications networks, and to thousands of buildings, including hospitals and schools. Gonaïves, the country's fourth most populous city, was completely flooded when torrents of rainwater ran down the surrounding mountains, feeding into a series of normally small rivers which quickly burst their banks. Nearly every house in the city was either destroyed or damaged, and when the flood waters finally receded in late September, the city

was left submerged in several feet of mud. More than half of the 793 people as a result of the storms were residents of Gonaïves.

The new government faced a difficult scenario, and Pierre-Louis acknowledged that her already hard task had been made still more awkward by the extent of the destruction and losses. She admitted that the damage to the agricultural sector would intensify the problem of food insecurity, and wondered aloud how long it would be before renewed street protests would force her from office in the same way as her predecessor.

Then, in early November, another disaster struck as more than 90 people – most of them children – died when a school building collapsed in a suburb of Port-au-Prince. The tragedy highlighted the problem of the uncontrolled growth of the country's shantytowns. ■



Haitian farmers need help to feed the population. Photo of rice farmer in the Artibonite by Leah Gordon.



Towns and cities are flooded because of deforestation and

**Food riots, floods, and collapsing schools – it's just one disaster after another. What's wrong with Haiti? CHARLES ARTHUR points the finger.**

# A country called

International media coverage periodically turns to Haiti at times of disaster, and it has been turning there quite a lot in recent months. Blame for the seemingly unending series of crises is usually pinned on Haiti itself, and ultimately on the Haitian people. But who is really responsible for the political instability, the violence, the poverty, the malnutrition, the environmental catastrophes, and the collapsing buildings?

There is no getting away from the fact that, to some extent, the country's problems are of its own making. Or, more precisely, nearly all today's problems can be traced back to the 1804 revolution which ended in independence from France and an end to slavery, but went no further. Independent Haiti emerged as a country sharply divided between a small but wealthy elite based in the coastal towns, and a majority of peasant farmers cultivating the mountainsides of the interior. Two hundred years later, this same essential imbalance in the structure of Haitian society persists. All the nation's wealth and investment is concentrated in the coastal towns, and the rural sector is completely neglected. The urban elite has pocketed the profits from the export of agricultural products, and controlled a state that has relied almost totally on revenue raised by taxing the peasantry. A tiny number of families have grown rich, while the vast majority struggle on in abject poverty.

Reformers and revolutionaries have tried to change this structure, but the beneficiaries of the established order have fiercely defended the status quo. Violence and brutality, soldiers and assassins, have been used to crush the forces for change. More recently, the challenge presented

by universal suffrage – 80% of voters want radical and immediate change – has been met both by traditional violence and by more sophisticated methods of coercion, cooptation, corruption, and confusion.

It is then the political and economic system that is responsible for the enduring crisis in Haiti, and until political action succeeds in bringing about a profound restructuring of the economy, the crisis will continue.

In the last two decades, a dire situation has been made much worse by the totally inappropriate economic policies insisted on by the international finance institutions. The neo-liberal 'reforms' have pushed Haiti to the brink of the precipice.

## The environmental crisis

Deforestation has left Haiti vulnerable to hurricanes and heavy rain. Tree cover has been reduced from an estimated 60% in 1923, to less than 2% today, and blame falls easily on the country's peasant farmers who make up nearly two-thirds of the population. But while they do indeed cut down the trees, they are not the guilty ones.

Haiti's peasants are desperately poor – four out of five farmers cannot satisfy their families' basic food needs. When you have nothing to eat, no animals to slaughter, no seeds to plant, nothing to sell, no prospect of finding paid-work, and your children's hair is turning orange because of malnutrition – what can you do? Felling some saplings and digging some roots to produce a sack of charcoal to sell for cash is, for many, literally a matter of life or death.

In the late 1980s peasant organisations flourished, and there was a glimmer of hope. Through the peasants' collective action, co-operatives and credit systems were set up, take-overs of idle land

organised, and silos to stockpile grains built. Peasant leaders stressed the need to involve peasant farmers themselves in plans for rural renewal that would necessarily involve steps to restore the environment.

Land reform – especially the need to resolve disputes over land ownership – was on the political agenda for the first time. Insecurity stemming from the confusing state of land titles left peasants feeling vulnerable to eviction and therefore unwilling to plan for the future – unwilling to leave a sapling to mature.

When the democratic government was restored in 1994 following three years of military rule, there was a chance to implement bold moves to address the rural crisis. Unfortunately, the Haitian government was more or less entirely dependent on foreign assistance, and the structural adjustment policies favoured by the international finance institutions had no place for agricultural development. In a draft Country Assistance Strategy paper leaked in 1996, the World Bank warned that two-thirds of the country's rural workforce would be unlikely to survive the neo-liberal economic measures demanded by the Bank and the IMF. The paper concluded that the rural population would be left with only two possibilities: to work in the industrial or service sector, or to emigrate.

And so it has come to pass. Foreign aid to Haiti has been turned on and off, but nearly all of it has been allocated to governance, security, elections, and support for the private sector. Next to nothing has been done to support the agricultural sector – no land reform, no subsidies for fertilisers or storage facilities, no subsidised credit, no reforestation campaign, and no irrigation projects.

"Neo-liberal 'reforms' have pushed Haiti to the brink of the precipice"



and soil erosion on the mountainsides.

# catastrophe

## The food crisis

Local agricultural production has declined, and, just as the free market strategists planned it, Haiti has become dependent on food imported from abroad. The rich families who formerly controlled exports trade are now monopolizing imports. To facilitate this trade, the neo-liberal strategy has required Haiti to reduce and even eliminate import tariffs.

The staple of the Haitian diet is rice and 30 years ago Haitian farmers produced around 210,000 metric tons a year, providing nearly all the rice that the population consumed. Today the total is down to less than 90,000 tons, while population growth has seen demand soar. The deficit is made up by rice imported from the United States – 360,000 tons a year!

At the end of 2007 when international food prices began to rise, Haitians had to pay more for their rice and other foodstuffs. The price rises continued and within a few months food had become so expensive that Haitians could not afford to eat. The riots in April forced the authorities to introduce a temporary subsidy on the price of rice, but food shortages continue.

## The urbanisation crisis

Generation after generation, Haiti's farmers have been left with only two 'assets' – their land and their children. The land has been consistently overworked, and agricultural yields have decreased. Just as the World Bank predicted, with no future at home, more and more sons and daughters of peasant farmer families have joined the exodus to the cities. Gonaïves and Cap-Haitien have grown enormously in size but it is in the capital where the impact is greatest.

“Once self-sufficient, Haiti is now heavily dependent on food imports”

The population of Port-au-Prince has swollen from 1.4 million in 1990 to well over two million by the start of the new millennium. This massive human influx has overwhelmed the city's limited services and infrastructure, and shanty-towns have mushroomed on any available piece of land.

Extensive and rigorous state intervention to provide sanitation, housing, social services, transport and urban planning would be required to make some sort of order out of the urban mess. This has not happened because... neo-liberal policies have instead required a reduction in the size of the state and cuts in government social spending. In this context, it is easy to see why the authorities are in no position to regulate the construction sector. Buildings are put up quickly and cheaply, wherever the builders like to put them. It is surprising that more don't fall down.

## Is there any hope?

The international economic crisis, and in particular the rising international price of food, has forced the Haitian authorities to admit that the agricultural sector needs immediate support if widespread hunger and possibly famine are to be avoided. In September, following the weeks of hurricane-induced destruction, the new government announced an emergency programme to be funded by savings accumulated from participation in Venezuela's PetroCaribe Agreement. The fact that by far the largest amount – US\$57 million – was allocated to the Ministry of Agriculture suggests that the new government is keenly aware of the fact that its predecessor was ousted for failing to address rising food prices. A focus on new irrigation systems and the distribution of seeds and tools indicates that the authorities see a need to intervene to support the ailing agricultural sector in order to avert severe food shortages in the coming months.

There are also indications that some planners at the international finance institutions have now recognised that neglecting Haiti's farmers was a big mistake, and funds will now be channelled into an effort to boost local production. However the problem is that having been run-down and exploited for decade after decade, it will take more than the implementation of a series of projects to revitalise the agricultural sector.

More fundamental changes to economic policy and to the structure of Haitian society will only come about when and if the Haitian majority can capture political power. The Haitian activist and economist, Camille Chalmers, speaking about the impact of the world crisis on Haiti, recently said, “As in any crisis there are also opportunities. If our connection to and dependence on the USA is going to be change, it will create a space to renegotiate this dependence, a chance to create a national project in Haiti on a different basis to the one that has been chosen by our leaders over the past 30 years.”

Chalmers continued, “We are a social movement that is terribly divided, terribly polarized, and even dissipated. However I think there are really interesting approaches going on, particularly in the peasant sector, where a collection of different movements are trying to build a common platform. Steps are being taken to achieve a sufficiently strong social movement to present different alternatives and to try to influence the situation, both in changing what is done in economic policy, as well as in the context of the senatorial elections next year and the presidential elections in 2011.” ■



What hope for Haiti's new generation of urban kids?

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# Heads up for Haitian sculptor

In July the Haitian sculptor, André Eugène, travelled to the UK to participate in the Society of Caribbean Studies Conference, this year held at Edinburgh University. His visit was funded by the Bridget Jones Award for Caribbean Studies – honouring a leading scholar of Francophone Caribbean literature who died in 2000. The award pays the travel costs of an arts researcher or practitioner living and working in the Caribbean to enable them to present their work to the annual conference.

An audience of about seventy people, primarily academics, heard Eugène introduce his work, and explain the ethos of the artists' collective based in the Grand Rue area of Port-au-Prince. A new documentary film, 'Atis-Rezistans: the Sculptors of Grand Rue', directed by Leah Gordon, which was partly funded by the Haiti Support Group, was then screened. After the screening, Eugène answered many questions about his work. In reply to one question, Eugène said, "I am very fortunate to get the chance to explain the experience and situation of Haitian artists to people in Scotland, as this can advance the

ideas of Haiti in the minds of the people. Unfortunately, our experience in Haiti is that you can talk, but nobody listens to you."

After the Edinburgh conference, Eugène travelled to London to attend the première of the 'Atis-Rezistans' documentary at the Horse Hospital in Russell Square. The screening, staged by the Haiti Support Group, played to a full house, with about 80 people in attendance. In the question and answer session following the film, Eugène noted that the most popular question asked in both Edinburgh and London appeared to be about the source of the many human skulls used in the collective's work. He explained that that in Haiti poor families can only afford to bury a family member in a cemetery tomb for three to six months, and after that the coffin is evicted to make way for the next interment. The ejected coffins pile up in the corner of the cemetery, and the bones wash out into the street during heavy storms. It is these unidentified bones and skulls that are recycled and used in their work. "One of my most celebrated works using a skull, 'Chef Seksyon', has travelled to Miami, Barbados, and Chicago,



André Eugène addressing the Society of Caribbean Studies Conference.

## "Unidentified bones and skulls are recycled and used in their work"

which is more than the Haitian would have been allowed to travel when he was alive." His answer neatly underlined the position of Haitians in the so-called globalised economy.

At the end of his trip, Eugène said, "I want to thank the Haiti Support Group for helping me to apply for the award, and for all the work they do to promote Haitian culture."

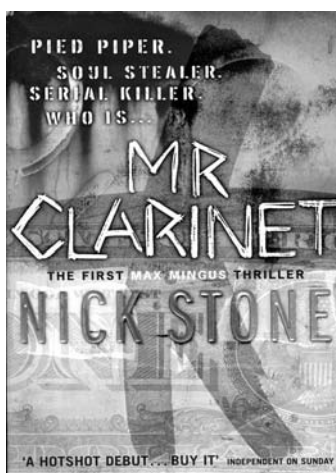
● More info:  
[www.atis-rezistans.com](http://www.atis-rezistans.com)

## Stone me – crime fiction in Haiti

*Mr. Clarinet* (Penguin 2006)  
*King of Swords* (Penguin 2008)

Nick Stone is a British writer of Haitian descent who has emerged as a powerful new voice in crime fiction. His first novel, 'Mr. Clarinet', is set in Haiti and was published before, but acts as a prequel to the 'King of Swords', which is set in amongst the Haitian community in Miami.

'Mr. Clarinet' is a strange fruit at times, mainly due to its shifting relationship to Haitian reality. The strongest storyline is the conflict between a self-styled Cité Soleil



guardian/gangster and the leader of a Bangladeshi UN battalion.

In 'King of Swords' we discover the same detective, Max Mingus, in Miami many years before he ventured to Haiti. It's a behemoth of a thriller, and sketches deeper more humane characters, especially Carmine, the luckless pimp son of a Haitian *bokor*. It's a totally gripping novel which plays effectively with Haitian mythology, history, and reality.

Leah Gordon

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