



What's cooking? - woman and child hoping for something better

Photo by Leah Gordon

Pot threatens to boil over

The patience of many thousands of Haitians finally snapped following the November 7th assassination of the Lavalas MP, Jean Hubert Feuile. In Port-au-Prince and many other cities crowds took to the streets, building roadblocks, searching vehicles for weapons and raiding the houses of the former military regime's supporters. Over half a dozen people were killed during confrontations across the country.

Ever since the US/UN invasion over a year ago, human rights groups, progressive church organisations and other democracy activists have implored the foreign troops to carry out an effective disarmament of the supporters of the deposed military regime. This has not happened. Given this fact, and the continuing impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of human rights abuses committed during the coup years, it is really no great surprise that many Haitians decided to take matters into their own hands. One demonstrator told the Inter Press Service, "We agreed to follow President Aristide's national reconciliation policy, but if this reconciliation is going to cost us our lives at any moment, then we say 'no' to Aristide."

The US/UN intervention has failed to resolve the crucial conflicts in Haiti. Cracks that have been papered are now beginning to show. Justice has been the foremost demand of the Haitian people, yet there have been but a handful of prosecutions for the crimes committed during the coup period. The majority of the population, already desperately poor, have seen

their standard of living drop still further, while the tiny elite that supported the coup has grown richer still.

Throughout the year the US has threatened and cajoled the Haitian government to proceed with the privatisation of state-run industries. Prime Minister Smarck Michel was a willing accomplice until popular protest and the election of a Lavalas-dominated Parliament forced him to resign in early October. His successor, Claudette Werleigh, had been Aristide's original choice for the job in 1994 but had been vetoed by the US.

With a Parliament and Prime Minister that more accurately reflected the political balance in Haiti, there was a chance that the pros and cons of privatisation could be openly discussed. However this process had barely begun when the US suspended US\$4.5 million in aid on the grounds that privatisation was falling behind schedule. Such heavy-handed pressure shows a blatant disregard for Haiti's democratic institutions.

Now Haiti is preparing for presidential elections due to take place on December 17th. It is widely assumed that the Lavalas candidate, Rene Preval, will win an overwhelming victory, but the real issue is the end of the Aristide presidency. When he was elected in 1990 his supporters expected radical changes in favour of the country's poor. First the coup and then the strait-jacket applied by the US/UN and their agencies dashed these expectations. Aristide has been able to quell mounting anger and frustration. Once he is gone, things just won't be the same.

Merciless plunder

the destruction of the countryside

by Charles Arthur

If Haiti did not have enough problems, the country is facing a staggering environmental crisis that threatens to undermine all efforts to build a fair and just future. Over the course of two centuries, trees have been felled in such quantities that it is now estimated that little more than 2% of the country is covered by forest. Without the tree roots to retain it, Haiti's topsoil, the layer containing nearly all the nutrients that nourish plant life, has become highly vulnerable to erosion. Each year nearly 40 million tons of soil, representing over 10,000 hectares of arable land, are washed off the hill sides by occasional heavy rainfall, and carried away by streams and rivers.

This loss of fertile topsoil has contributed to a severe decline in agricultural yields over the last three decades. In addition, rivers have filled with silt, damaging irrigation systems and cutting output from hydroelectric plants. On reaching the sea, this sedimentation is decimating coastal fish stocks. In some parts of the country the remaining thin soil cannot hold rainfall which quickly cascades off into gulleys and ravines rather than trickling down into underground watercourses. Sea water is drawn up by osmosis, and the soil is ruined for planting. In other areas, the lack of trees has led to reduced rainfall, and the land is turning into desert. For the vast majority of Haitians hunger is a daily reality, and starvation a real possibility.

Squeezing the peasantry

The story of how this disastrous state of affairs came about is inextricably bound up with the development of Haiti's starkly polarised class system. In the aftermath of the revolution (1791-1804) a small minority living in the cities, through its control of the state machinery, began a merciless plundering of the country's productive capacity. The elite extracted revenue from the majority smallholding peasantry by heavy and unrelenting taxation. Nothing, no investment, no assistance, was ever put back into the peasant sector.

The combination of this extractive system with a growing population put an unsustainable pressure on the land. With each new generation existing peasant plots were sub-divided, and farmed even more intensively. New areas in the mountains were cleared for cultivation. By 1950 the population had grown to three and a half million, of which approximately 80% were peasants. In the absence of any other source of fuel, trees were felled in increasing numbers, both for the peasants' own use, and to supply a growing urban demand for charcoal.

Under the Duvaliers

In this context more recent political developments have brought Haiti to the edge of a catastrophe. The regime of 'Papa Doc' Duvalier had a direct impact on the environment-Haiti's rapidly dwindling tree cover was further depleted by the tactic of

razing many hectares of forest to deprive potential guerilla insurgents of places to hide. Less direct but more damaging still for the environmental situation was the deterioration of the agricultural sector under the Duvaliers. At the national level, taxes, levies and duties were increased still further, while at a local level the corrupt and exploitative arm of the state reached even further in the form of the Tonton Macoutes and the rural section chiefs.

The production of crops on small plots with the simplest tools and methods meant that the land was consistently overworked. The peasant could not afford to leave land idle nor allow trees to remain where crops could be planted. On the steep mountain slopes such intensive production and lack of trees led to soil erosion.

The peasant response

With the fall of Baby Doc Duvalier peas-

ant producers at last had some political space to try and solve these problems. Peasant groups organised land takeovers, cooperatives, and credit systems, and built silos to stockpile grains like rice and corn. With the 1990 election of Aristide there was, for the first time, a real prospect of a government that would work with and for the peasantry, and, in doing so, address the serious environmental issues.

Sadly the three year coup period was a disaster for the environment. Peasant organisations were a primary target for military repression. Organisers were hunted down and killed, and projects and networks destroyed. The half-hearted economic embargoes imposed by the United Nations only made matters worse by sending the living costs of the poor rocketing. Where all the trees had been felled, peasants searched for roots and even felled

mature fruit trees to sell to charcoal producers. The long-term benefit of a tree as a producer of fruit and retainer of topsoil was sacrificed in the struggle just to stay alive.

With the return of Aristide and democratic government, the peasant organisations have begun the difficult task of repairing and restoring a devastated countryside. In the opinion of many experts only the peasantry has the will, the expertise, and the capacity to implement the measures necessary to halt erosion and begin effective reforestation.

● A longer analysis of Haiti's environmental decline and the attempts to arrest it will appear in 'Green Guerrillas: Environmental Conflicts in Latin America' to be published by the Latin America Bureau in April 1996.



Sacks of charcoal brought from Jérémie being unloaded in Port-au-Prince. Photo by Leah Gordon

"We have our own plan" - MPP

In October, Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, founder of the Peasant Movement of Papaye (MPP) and spokesperson for the National Peasant Movement of the Papaye Congress (MPNKP), visited the UK as a guest of the Haiti Support Group. At meetings in London, Liverpool, Oxford and Norwich he outlined his hopes, and stressed the threat posed by the structural adjustment programme.

Speaking about the struggle to rebuild the MPP, Chavannes said, "Before the coup all the structures and organisations of the MPP were in place, but now we are in a position where we are just beginning to build everything up again." Nevertheless, he remarked that since the return of President Aristide many peasants had joined the MPP. "As a result of a recent survey of the Central Plateau region we have found that the MPP now has 4,000 groups with a total of 50,000 members."

On the structural adjustment programme (SAP) forced on Haiti by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Chavannes condemned the removal of import tariffs and promotion of agro-exports, "The Americans returned Aristide with what we call a poisoned packet. The neo-liberal plan envisages

the elimination of the small peasantry in order to develop large farms for agro-industry. US policy aims to destroy Haitian food production."

According to Chavannes, the SAP will open the Haitian market to cheap foreign, especially US, food imports, thus destroying the livelihood of the small Haitian peasant. Many would be obliged to move to the cities to find work in the US-owned assembly industries, while others would have to work as agricultural labourers producing specialist crops such as tropical fruit for export to the US market. As Chavannes put it, "We will have to eat the leftovers from their main course so we can produce their dessert."

He continued, "That is their plan, but we have our own ideas. The basis of the MPP's struggle is that Haiti should be able to determine its own policies in the area of food production, and indeed, in everything else." For Chavannes, the peasants' struggle is necessarily a struggle to save Haiti's ailing environment. "If land, soil and water are not conserved we know the peasants cannot survive. The MPP is working on soil conserva-

tion, reforestation and improved productivity with natural fertilisers."

As for the future, he acknowledged that some form of agriculture for export was necessary, but, in contrast to the SAP, he outlined an economic approach that would integrate the existing peasant-based system. "The peasants are already trying different approaches. For example, in the north east, the state has just donated 6,000 carros to a peasant group (1 carro equals 1.29 hectares). They are using the land in the following way: 1 carro has been allocated to each peasant for their individual use; 1,000 carro

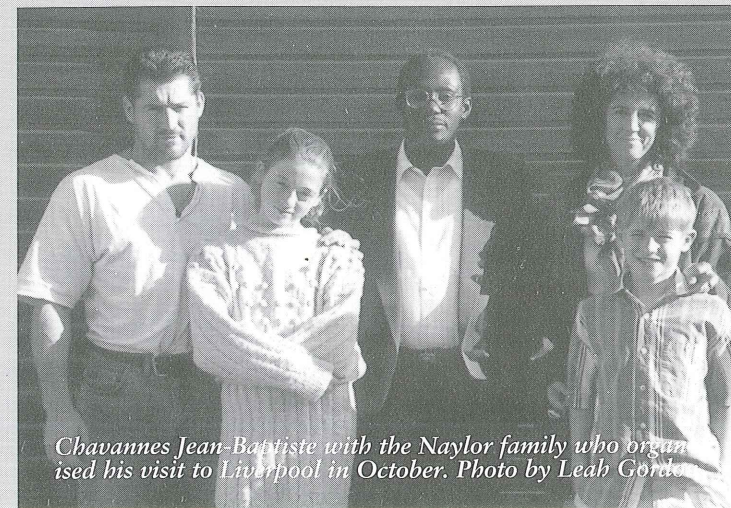
have been set aside for reforestation; and 2,000 carro will be used collectively for animal husbandry and for a sugar cane refinery, a school, a clinic and a sports field."

Rejecting the arguments of those who say Haiti has no choice but to submit to the dictates of the international donor agencies, Chavannes insisted that a national economic plan in support of domestic production was a viable option. "Haiti was previously nearly self-sufficient but now we import 70-80% of the food we consume. Two hundred thousand tonnes of rice a year are needed to feed the nation. In the Artibonite region we could produce up to 140,000 tonnes if only irrigation systems were set up. Then there is grain. We need 350-400,000 tonnes each year - Haiti could be producing this quantity within five years, and the country could be self-sufficient."

Pressure to conform to the SAP has so far impeded government efforts in this direction. Projects funded by foreign aid are not helping rural economic development "There has been a focus, conditioned by international aid agencies, on highly labour intensive projects such as the repair of roads, which is not a top priority for the peasants. The greatest effort should be spent in funding projects of reforestation, soil conservation and repairing irrigation systems." ■



Poverty-stricken peasants have no option but to cut down trees and sell the wood to charcoal producers. Photo by Charles Arthur



Chavannes Jean-Baptiste with the Naylor family who organised his visit to Liverpool in October. Photo by Leah Gordon

US military intelligence worried about "success" of UN operation

by Christian Wisskirchen

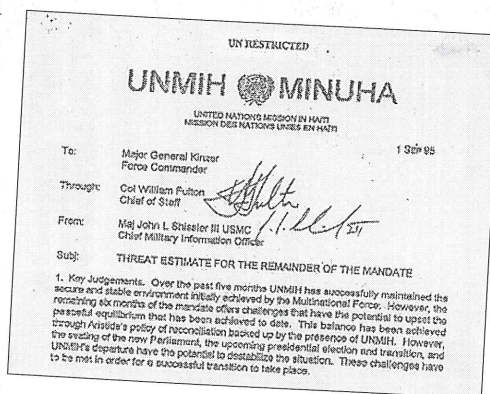
In one of the most interesting documents to surface since the UN Mission in Haiti (UNMIH) got under way in September 1994, the Chief Military Information Officer for the UN, US Major John Shissler, recently outlined his concerns concerning political developments in Haiti. His confidential memo, entitled "Threat estimate for the remainder of the mandate", dated 1.9.95 and addressed to UNMIH commander Gen. Kinzer, reveals the thinking of US military intelligence and shows how it attempts to impose its agenda on the UN and the Haitian people.

Speculating about the agenda of the Lavalas dominated parliament, Maj. Shissler fears that it will demand "implementation of populist policies such as increased wages, a halt to privatisation and price controls", an extension of Aristide's term to make up for his years in exile ("a red flag" for the international community) and prosecution of the crimes of the de facto government ("has the potential to be perceived as retribution thus further alienating elements on the right and some members of the economic elite").

These demands, fears Shissler, "will pull Aristide's policies to the left" and "have the potential to play themselves out in the streets", possibly leading to violent protests against the UN by Haitians, who "perceive unwanted and excessive international influence addressing the above issues".

Despite the recent shooting of a UN police officer in Petit Goâve for which demobilised Haitian soldiers claimed responsibility, Major Shissler down plays the threat posed by the pro-coup forces ("disorganised and in disarray") but sees the main risk for UNMIH within the popular sector.

The memo identifies a politicised new



police force as "the single most dangerous threat to the establishment of a stable government". However, the politicisation Shissler is afraid of is a possible loyalty to the Aristide government, not the more likely development of a "state within the state". He criticises the "favouritism shown Regina cadets for promotion". The Regina cadets were trained in Canada during Aristide's exile to form the nucleus of a new democratic police force after the end of the coup d'état. It is clearly essential that the senior ranks in the police force be filled with officers that have shown a commitment to a democratic society. Apparently not a priority for Shissler.

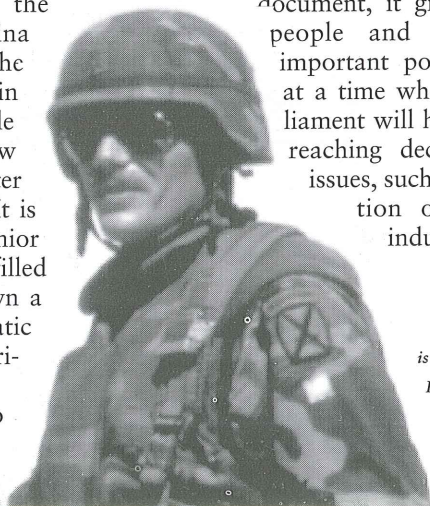
He desperately tries to

square the circle. While being forced to admit that "Operation Uphold Democracy" has not laid the foundations for a secure and sustainable development ("The economy...has not improved sufficiently to address the needs of the mass of the Haitian population"), he nevertheless stays committed to the flawed privatisation policy of the Michel-administration which "attempts to balance populist demands with prudent economic policy" and advocates demagogic means to sell it to the Haitian public, unashamedly proposing to instrumentalise President Aristide's popularity: "An extensive MIST¹ effort should be designed to address Haitian fears about the transition ... This effort should include President Aristide, because of his public stature, in an effort to reduce uncertainty about the future ... The more we can present a "business as usual" look to the transition the more we will reduce potential threats."

Shissler realises that Haitians are beginning to mobilise against the return to the neo-liberal plan of the 1980's ("UNMIH statistics indicate that there has been a steady increase in demonstrations with economic themes..."), but hopes that with the help of psychological operations, the situation can be pacified until the UNMIH has left Haiti. After all, what is at stake for Maj. Shissler is not the future of Haiti, but merely the physical safety of the UN force, not forgetting that in Washington the "success" of the operation is determined almost exclusively by a low number of US casualties. Therefore his final warning: "The threat will disappear only when the last UNMIH soldier departs Haiti". He forgot to add: "et après nous le déluge!"

While the contents of the memo are mostly unsurprising for Haiti-watchers, it is written on UNMIH notepaper and thus serves as documentary evidence that the UN, fifty years after it was given the task "to develop friendly relations among nations based on the respect for the principles of equal rights and self-determination of peoples" (art.1 (2) UN Charter), is being (ab)used as the foreign policy instrument for US plans in Haiti.

Moreover, being an official UN document, it gives the Haitian people and lawmakers an important point of reference at a time when the new parliament will have to make far reaching decisions on vital issues, such as the privatisation of the national industries.



¹New acronym for what is known as 'Psyops' or Psychological Operations of the US Army.