Last October, when the Haitian army refused to comply with the UN-brokered accord to restore democracy, the international community needed to act decisively. It has failed to do so and as a result the Haitian crisis has gone from bad to worse.

The limited UN embargo on the trade of fuel and arms to Haiti has failed to force the army to allow the return of President Aristide and is now causing widespread suffering. In rural areas transport has all but stopped, there is no electricity supply, and what food there is has rocketed in price. A sharp increase in cases of severe malnutrition indicates that a growing number of families have used up whatever food reserves they had.

For the majority of Haitians the already desperate struggle to survive is now immeasurably harder. In the southern town of Jérémie, a Catholic priest known for his support for Aristide’s popular democracy movement, ‘Lavalas’, said, ‘People supported the embargo because Aristide asked for it and they thought it would force the army to leave. But after all these months of embargo, we have a catastrophe.’

Others though still see the embargo as the only way to make the Haitian army respect their desire for change. “We tasted a little bit of democracy,” explained an unemployed man in Ca Ira, a coastal village south-west of Port-au-Prince. “We tasted it and it tastes pretty good. That’s the reason we’re willing to die for it. The army has so far been largely unaffected thanks to the continuing supply of fuel coming across the Dominican Republic border. Further action needs to be taken and taken quickly. As a carpenter in Léogâne put it, ‘If you’re going to have an embargo, have a real embargo.’ If the UN is serious about supporting democracy in Haiti why doesn’t it cut air links, apply a total embargo on all products, and force the Dominican Republic to respect it?

Recently the US raised the stakes by freezing the assets and revoking the entry visas of 523 army officers, and in late January, during a visit by President Aristide, Canadian officials responded positively to the idea of forming a police force composed of exiled Haitians. Such a force, loyal to the democratic government, could play an important role in restoring Aristide and guaranteeing the safety of his supporters in Haiti.

But for all the diplomatic manoeuvres the fact remains that, twenty-eight months since the coup, and a year since Clinton took office, the army and its killing machine is still firmly in control. At this rate it seems that negotiations alone will not bring democracy back to Haiti. Perhaps, just as they did 200 years ago, the Haitians themselves will have to organise and mobilise to overthrow a cruel and brutal tyranny.
Clamped down in Jérémie

Three members of the Haiti Support Group recently returned from Haiti. A human rights worker based in Gonaives, a health worker near Jacmel and a peace volunteer in Jérémie, here provide eyewitness accounts of life inside the capital during the run-up to the non-return of President Aristide last year.

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How will Haiti get out of the mess it is in? Judging from recent reports, the outlook is bleak. Still no way out has been found on what appears to be a one-way road to disaster. Yet away from Port-au-Prince, in rural Haiti where the real story of literacy, health and education is being told, there is a feeling of hope. People are struggling together to solve their problems.

The department of which Gonaives is the capital, L’Artibonite, contains the richest and most fertile agricultural areas in the country — the river of the same name providing the water for complex irrigation systems. Many of the human rights abuses in the area begin as land disputes. The judicial system is totally dysfunctional, judgments depending almost always on bribery and lávismen. Even the most remote rural areas have a chief de section, the local army nominee, and his entourage of attachés who pay the position which allows them carte blanche to rob, extort and beat. It is this omnipresent paramilitary network which provides the army with the intelligence it needs on local political sympathies and which runs the rural areas like a mafia which has forgotten the cause of honour.

From mid-August, pre-Aristide campaigns started sticking up small posters of the President, the attitude of the authorities towards a return of constitutional order became clear. A pattern of severe beatings emerged in the areas where the posters had been distributed. For many, this was the first indication that the security forces had no intention of allowing Aristide to return.

Hope in the community

From the beginning of 1992 until the summer of 1993 I lived and worked in an isolated community in the countryside between Port-au-Prince and the southern town of Jérémie. I arrived there in the lesser Belle Anse, a typical bright yellow painted house, which took us beyond the backpacking of mountains, forests and rivers on the way. Halfway across one river the bus got stuck in the mud, and the passengers, travelers, porters and policemen joined together, either pushing at one end or tugging on the other to try and dislodge it. Four hours later the community spirit triumphed and the less Belle Anse moved out of the increasing river swell that could easily have over-tumed the boat.

Tree nurseries

Deforestation and heavy downpours during the rainy season combine to wash more and more of Haiti into the sea — a seemingly irrevocable situation. But a group of church members decided to do something about the problems in their community. The first thing they tackled was deforestation, and a tree nursery was set up. Mature seedlings were then sold on a non-profit basis. The few interested people were also sent on basic health training courses.

In spite of the 1991 coup these initiatives have grown. News of the tree nursery spread and individuals from other areas came by advice on how they could set up similar projects. The motto — ‘Plant four tree seedlings for every one you cut down — spread by word-of-mouth (radio 600). In Jérémie people were alerted to the consequences of deforestation.

A mango tree equals 2.5 cubic or more of charcoal — not much you may think, but in a country under embargo the demand for, and the price of charcoal has soared. Creating a balance is not sufficient to solve the problem but the encouraging fact is that four tree nurseries have been established within a radius of three hours walking distance from the original nursery.

At the grassroots

Together with other ‘Agents de Santé’, I sought to key into essential health care needs and develop a network of skilled volunteer health workers within the same radius. The work continues — three trained volunteer health workers have joined the team and others are coming forward to participate in the informal training programme now run by the church.

My favourite memories are of sitting in neighbours’ yards talking and listening. These are people concerned and prayerful for their country. The young ones circled around a short-wave radio, listening to Voice of America’s Creole news programme. Aristide is not there any more, but the song is the Army. They are already trying to implement justice, peace and stability at the grassroots level, but increasingly their efforts are being hindered by the embargo.
Cloud over Cité Soleil

by Leah Gordan

"Just one hour from Miami and we are confronted by the most brutal and demonising poverty on earth." This is how a doctor, having worked there for nearly two decades, described Cité Soleil. About 200,000 people occupy five square kilometres of land in Cité Soleil, the Port-au-Prince slum built on reclaimed sea-swamps.

Some of the neighbourhoods are euphemistically called 'Brooklyn' and 'Boston', but the reality of life consists of a maze of primitive mud and brick structures reinforced with abandoned metal sheeting and cardboard packing cases. There is no running water or sewage system, just filthy open drainage ditches separating the rows of homes. But these ditches are useless when the rains fall heavily and torrents, rich with sewage, rage through the shacks. "Mothers have to gather up small children in their arms lest they be swept away," said the doctor.

To banish beggars

Cité Soleil was created as a cosmetic housing programme in the sixties by 'Papa Doc' Duvalier, and named Cité Simone after his wife. Supposedly he intended to banish all the beggars of Port-au-Prince there so that they never need be seen again. But the inhabitants of Cité Soleil will not be silent or forgotten in their ocean-side hell built on landfill - they remain at the forefront of popular resistance.

The slum was rebaptised Cité Soleil in 1986 after 'Baby Doc' fled to France. This was a tribute to Radio Soleil, the popular Catholic radio station that provided the only uncensored news in the final days of the Duvaliers' reign. The area has traditionally been a stronghold of the Lavalas movement, and home of many grassroots organisations. Despite the poverty of conditions there is a rich and strong community spirit.

Put to the flame

Since the 1991 coup Cité Soleil has been targeted by the military and attachés. During late 1993 no one dared leave their shacks after dark for fear of the gunmen driving around the streets shooting randomly. This terrorism tragically culminated in the terrible fire that swept through Cité Soleil on 27 December 1993. At least 1000 homes were destroyed, leaving about 5000 people homeless. Between 50 and 70 people of ages ranging from about seven months to 80 years right wing are trying to change the name back to Cité Simone. Gangs are now forcing tap-tap drivers to change their destination signs. A recent visitor saw a tap-tap with its tyres shot out for carrying a Cité Soleil sign.

Cité Simone graffiti has gone up on the concrete walls around the slum and some Cité Soleil signs on walls have been painted over. A sign-maker, Pierre Lefleur, said that FRAPH forced him to make the new signs for the drivers - "If you don't put up the sign they beat you up, and if you don't sell the sign they ask, Who do you think you are? Do you think your father is coming back?"

The last comment is a reference to the exiled President Aristide supporters say that this name change should not be taken lightly. One local priest said, "This is one more indication that the new Duvalisters are trying to recover the country."

STOP PRESS: On February 2nd at least a dozen young men were murdered when the house in which they were staying was attacked by soldiers and armed civilians.

The victims were all members of democratic organisations in Cité Soleil who had been forced to flee their neighbourhood the previous week because of searches by the army and FRAPH.

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