Three years ago, who would have betted on President Aristide returning to Haiti? Let alone with the support of the United States which for decades has helped to keep Duvalierism alive and kicking. But credit for the return of Aristide must be given to all those—Haitians and their friends all over the world—who kept struggling against all odds for the return of democracy. By taking to leaky rafts in their thousands, Haitians—backed by solidarity groups, the Congressional Black Caucus and even Hollywood stars, like Jonathan Demme—forced President Clinton’s hand.

In one sense, the return of ‘Titid’—as his supporters affectionately call him—is a historic event. No other democratically elected President who was overthrown has returned to office. If history always repeated itself, Aristide would have stayed in exile. But Haiti is no Grenada or Panama. This is not the overthrow of a legitimate government but its restoration.

In another sense, Aristide has less room now for economic and social manoeuvres than he had before the coup. Haiti needs the $770 million pledged in foreign aid, but at the expense of becoming a worse sweat shop than before. Already Aristide had to reverse his own choice for Prime Minister from Claudette Werleigh, who has obvious sympathies for the poor, in favour of Smarck Michel, who is closer to the business elite.

But in five centuries of dictatorship Haitians have learnt to organise in different ways than other societies. It is the local grassroots organisations that matter, and not so much centralised institutions that run the state in Western-style democracies.

To be sure, the US and the UN will try to impose a representative “controlled” democracy, but Haitians will fight for their own, participatory model. This will probably be a long, protracted fight—as we see in other Latin American countries—but at least now a real start can be made. The UN more or less abandoned Haiti after the 1990 elections, leaving the Duvalierist structure untouched. Not that they are likely to try very hard to remove it, but the international presence until 1996 will give democracy activists in Haiti the chance to organise properly and, hopefully, uproot that structure for good.

The first step is to outlaw and dismantle the paramilitaries. These thugs must not be allowed to convert into a political party. Yes to reconciliation, but criminals must be brought to justice. No to vengeance, but independent judges don’t grow on trees! Sadly, while Haitians grapple with this problem, the US and the paramilitaries still play musical chairs. Groups like ours can make a difference. We must keep the spotlight on Haiti:

- UNCOVER attempts to undermine the democratic process
- CALL FOR programmes to support returning refugees
- DEMAND that aid reaches small local NGO’s and not the pockets of the elite
- HELP ESTABLISH links between grassroots organisations and supporting bodies in our country and highlight many other issues.

The return of formal democracy to Haiti is a great success but—as the report by Charles Arthur on the following pages shows—the real work has only just begun.
Charles Arthur and Leah Gordon of the HSG arrived in Haiti just before President Aristide returned. They spoke to many Haitians, especially from the grassroots movements, to find out how they see the new situation and to explore how the HSG may help Haiti in the future. This is an exclusive report from CHARLES ARTHUR in Haiti

Six weeks since the arrival of the US military, and for most Haitians it is time to draw breath and adjust to the new situation. So far the presence of US troops, the lifting of old sanctions, and the return of President Aristide have had a positive effect on people’s everyday lives. But, as one Haitian newspaper put it, “the party is over, the work begins.”

In many ways the country is unrecognisable compared with how it was this time last year. Now the streets of Port-au-Prince are buzzing with people and traffic. There is electricity 24 hours a day. Men sit outside their houses playing cards and dominoes, and street vendors trade late into the evening. One man in the poor district of Bel-Air said, “the spirit of Lavalas lives on. After three years of terror we can sleep at night without fear of being beaten or shot.”

This is largely true in Port-au-Prince, where most US troops are concentrated, and in Cap-Haitien, where the US has replaced the existing military authorities. However, it is unclear whether the new situation is in any way permanent — out in the smaller towns and the countryside an atmosphere of insecurity persists. According to Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, spokesperson for the national peasant movement, MPFK, “disarmament is a dream.”

It is this reality from terror which explains the current good feeling towards the US intervention in Haiti. The return of a few policemen by US troops in Cap-Haitien, and the US decision to close the headquarters of FRAPH (paramilitary death squad) in the capital, were key events which led to an improvement in security. In some areas the Haitian army and police keep a low profile. In others they deserted their posts. Many local military posts and FRAPH offices have been sacked or demolished by protestors. Gerard Jean-Juste, a leading member of the Ti Legliz (the liberation theology wing of the Episcopal Church) said the intervention means, “we can speak, we can walk, we can assemble. We are on our way to most of the basic human rights.”

This involves a great deal of red tape. For the removal of the Haitian military and the disarmament of FRAPH members, attack, and section chiefs. In the small community of Lospalos, ten miles from Hinche, villagers complained that the six local attackês still function openly.

US forces take up the success of the weapons conversion to buy-back programme. In reality — and this is admitted by the US military officials — the problem is far from over.

Many Haitian soldiers who deserted took their arms with them while the attackês are now in mortarmé, or hiding. Even those attackês apprehended by the people and handed over to the US troops were mostly set free a few days later. There is concern that the violence against grassroots organisations and attachments of US attaches is still functioning openly.

The HSG has been involved in a joint lobbying effort with the Refugees Council regarding the repatriation of Haitian refugees from the US Naval Base at Guantanamo, Cuba. The US is returning Haitian refugees at a rate of 50-200 a day. Many of them want to return but it will be the mobilisation of the people that can change it.

“I think Aristide will be struggling against it [the IMF plan] but it will be the mobilisation of the people that can change it.”

Chavannes Jean-Baptiste also stressed the importance of the grassroots organisations regrouping and assuming their role as the driving force for the development of participatory democracy in Haiti. On the IMF/World Bank structural readjustment plan for Haiti, he said, “if we vote against this plan they will be able to put in place everything the people and handed over to the US troops were mostly set free a few days later. There is concern that the violence against grassroots organisations and attachments of US attaches is still functioning openly.

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On 26 October Father Edwin Paraison received the 1994 Anti-Slavery Award, established by Anti-Slavery International in 1990, in recognition of his courageous work with Haitian cane cutters in the Dominican Republic.

Anti-Slavery has for years been the main champion of the cause of these 40,000 people, whose fate deserves much greater attention. The HSG was represented at the award ceremony and also had a private meeting with him. He reminded us that the working conditions on the sugar plantations in the DR are the worst in the whole of the Americas — tantamount to actual slavery. The Haitians are being held in special camps, so-called bateyes, where armed guards prevent any escape.

Father Paraison has done some very effective work in the past, including the repatriation to Haiti of more than 50 children, some as young as nine, who had been forced to work in the plantations against their will.

As a result of his appearance in a TV programme in the DR and his subsequent testimony before a sub-committee of the US-Senate the DR government was forced to outlaw child labour on the sugar plantations. He has also helped Haitian refugees who fled to the DR after the 1991 coup d'état.

One of Father Paraison’s most urgent concerns is the strengthening of two small cane workers’ unions, something he has been working on since 1990. These unions have currently about 450 members, 90% of whom are Haitian.

While they are officially recognised, their work is hampered by the DR government, whose attitude towards Haitians is notoriously hostile. It is vital that these unions grow in strength and numbers because they are the only organisations which work exclusively on improving the situation of the Haitian workers. The HSG is looking into ways of helping with this issue.

**Haitian Priest Receives Anti-Slavery Award in London**

**Visit of Bishop Romelus**

Bishop Willy Romelus of Jeremie, the only Haitian bishop who openly spoke out against the coup d'état, is visiting the UK and Ireland from 10-17 November at the invitation of CIIR.

There will be a public meeting with him in Liverpool on Sunday 13th, 5-7pm at St. Margaret Mary’s, Pilch Lane (contact the Parish House: 051-228 1332 or Mike Naylor: 051-489 8522) and he is meeting the HSG in London on Wednesday 16th, 7.30 pm, at Trinity Church, Hodford Road. (Please contact the office.)

**Public Lecture at Warwick University**

The Rev Dr Leslie Griffiths, one of the founders of the HSG and one of the most distinguished experts on Haiti will deliver a lecture on 1 December, 5.30 pm at Warwick University in Coventry, entitled: “Haiti: What hope? Aristide’s first 50 days.” Venue: Chaplaincy (on campus), Gibbet Hill Road. Entry free, all welcome.

**HSG - ‘Strategy Meeting’**

In view of the significant changes taking place in Haiti, a “strategy meeting” will be held on 17 December, 2 p.m., to debate the future direction of our work and organisational matters. The venue has not yet been decided.

All members interested in attending please notify the office by 30 November at the latest. This is also the deadline for any written suggestions.