Aristide is back

Ten years since he was first elected President, Jean-Bertrand Aristide has returned to power following an election in November that was boycotted by all the main opposition parties. They refused to take part, claiming that, far from being independent, the council that organised the poll was controlled by Aristide's Lavalas Family Party. Their absence left Aristide, and his party's candidates for a third of the Senate seats, to stand virtually unopposed.

The run-up to the November 26th poll was marred by over a dozen small explosions when homemade grenades were detonated by unidentified individuals in different parts of the capital, Port-au-Prince. The explosions killed two children and injured many others. Fear of further violence, and the lack of a genuine contest, contributed to a relatively low turnout in the capital, but local media reported high rates of participation in many of the city's poor areas, and in the provincial towns.

In the absence of international election observers, the voter participation rate was hotly contested - the official tally was 62%, but the Democratic Convergence opposition coalition estimated a turnout as low as five per cent. Whatever the reality, it is clear from the first round results in May's Parliamentary elections that Aristide's Lavalas Family Party commands considerable support across the country. Most independent analysts agree that, as Aristide remains by far the most popular politician in Haiti, he would have easily won a free and fair election. The country's poor and downtrodden majority still looks to him as the one leader they believe will respond to its demands.

Whether he will be able to implement his essentially populist programme of job creation, improved social services, and partnership between the State and the private sector, remains to be seen. On the one hand, unlike in 1991 when he faced a hostile legislature, this time he will govern with a Parliament dominated by his Lavalas Family Party - it has 26 out of 27 Senate seats, and 73 of the 83 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Neither will he have to contend with the military, which overthrew his first administration. On being restored to office by a United Nations invasion in 1994, he disbanded the entire institution the following year.

On the debit side, despite some two billion dollars of international aid over the past five years, the economy has failed to recover from the effects of the international sanctions against the 1991-94 military regime. Future aid is now in doubt as the major donors continue to question the legitimacy of the 2000

Former allies and supporters have turned against him - foreign aid is withheld
Aristide is back

Following the success of the 1999-2000 solidarity action on behalf of workers at the Grand Marnier plantation near Cap-Haitien (see Haiti Briefing No 40), workers producing orange peel for the Cointreau liqueur have launched a similar campaign. Readers of Haiti Briefing are urged to support the new Cointreau Workers' Union in Haiti by contacting the Rémy Cointreau company (see end of article for details).

The Rémy Cointreau website will take you to a page about how the subtle harmony of bitter and sweet oranges makes every sip of Cointreau an extraordinary, multi-sensory taste journey. It proudly relates how the bitter orange is grown in the Caribbean, how the peel is separated from the pulp by hand, dried in the sun, and then shipped to the Cointreau distillery in Angers, France. It is told that, once distilled, the liquid is blended with water and alcohol using a secret recipe that remains unchanged for almost 150 years.

What the website doesn't tell us is that the workers in Haiti who so carefully harvest and then separate the peel from the pulp must endure pay and conditions that are also unchanged in almost 150 years.

At two locations in the north of Haiti, men and women employed by a Haitian company, in which Rémy Cointreau owns a minority share, labour all day to make the minimum wage of 36 gourdes – a pitiful amount that represents just US$1.50.

Rémy Cointreau profits

The union of workers at the Guacimal company has called for international pressure to be put on the French shareholders, Rémy Cointreau. The drinks giant, which has a portfolio of prestigious brands such as Remy Martin cognac, Mount Gay rum and Piper Heidsieck champagne, recently expanded with the US$460 million acquisition of the Dutch firm, Bols. In the financial year 1999-2000, it recorded a net operating profit of US$61 million, a 163% increase compared with the previous year.

Physical harassment

Having failed with legal intimidation, the Guacimal management resorted to old-fashioned physical harassment and intimidation. Throughout November, workers at the plantation identified as union members were beaten up or prevented from working. Later, the plantation supervisor prevented the collection trucks from picking up oranges harvested by workers thought to be sympathetic to the union. New squads of "scabs" workers have been recruited.

At Madeline, the management also appears determined to punish the workers for unionising. Traditionally, employment at the Madeline plantation has been passed from father to son, and from mother to daughter. This allowed sick workers to be temporarily replaced by family members during their illness. On November 20th, the plant supervisor suddenly declared that this practice would now be allowed, and that absent workers would be replaced by new recruits. When the Madeline union put forward a demand for a wage increase from 11 to 15 cents per kilo of oranges processed, the management offered 25 cents per container increase!

Solidarity needed

Solidarity groups in France and the US have already contacted Rémy Cointreau but, rather than instructing Guacimal to play ball with the new union, the company has embarked on a bizarre public relations offensive. In reply to an appeal raising the issue of workers' rights, Rémy Cointreau press officer, Joelle Jezquel, has claimed that a company representative has already visited Madeline and concluded an agreement with the union.

However, Elimele Micheline Toussaint, Secretary of the Union of Workers at Guacimal, rejects this claim out of hand, and in a published reply wrote, "Your company's representative, Mr. Morinoue, did not even bother to turn up, and even less to meet with us or to ask us about our grievances...We wish to state clearly and unequivocally that there was no communication of any kind between the union, the workers and Mr. Morinoue."

She continued, "The union would like nothing better than to meet in Haiti with Cointreau representatives at the earliest possible date."

Please respond to the Haitian union of Cointreau workers' appeal for help by writing to Dominique Hédiard Dubreuil, chairperson of Rémy Cointreau, and ask her to persuade the Guacimal managers in Haiti to hold open and transparent negotiations with the Union.

Please note that the Cointreau workers' union is not making a threat of a consumer boycott of Rémy Cointreau products. Therefore, please do not mention this in your letter. Just ask Rémy Cointreau to instruct Guacimal to recognise the Union's right to negotiate, in line with Haitian labour legislation, and express your hope that meaningful negotiations regarding the Union's demands will start immediately.

Write to:
Dominique Hédiard Dubreuil, Rémy Cointreau, 152, avenue des Champs-Élysées, 75008 Paris, France. Email: joelle.jezquel@remycointreau.com

Cointreau Workers Organise Solidarity Needed

St. Raphael, around 300 plantation workers harvest the oranges that are then sent to be cut and peeled by 32 workers at a processing plant in the village of Madeline. The Madeline factory is in a squad condition – toilets and showers are disgusting. Working without gloves, or protective clothing, the workers are soaked in the orange spray and inhale the citric acid vapor – fingernails are corroded away, and lung complications are common.

Union-busting

In October 2000, the Cointreau workers formed a union to press for basic rights, such as respect for the law in relation to the Labour Code, negotiations regarding a wage increase, and recognition of the union and the principle of collective bargaining. However, the Haitian company, Guacimal, that is owned by the same managers that represent the Mariman-Lapoutte company in Haiti, not only refused to even enter negotiations with the union but have engaged in a series of union-busting moves.

As soon as the union was formed, and a list of grievances presented to the management, the latter summoned the police and a local Justice of the Peace in an attempt to have the union disbanded. The workers refused to be intimidated and stood up for their legal rights. The management then contacted the government Ministry of Labour which sent a delegation to the plantation and ruled that the union structure was illegal and would have to be reconstituted before negotiations could begin. Undaunted, the union complied with these conditions and formed a new committee.

For up-to-date news see:
http://www.ogp.org/haftounion/the_mov e_index.html
Debt payment: immoral and profoundly unjust

The Haiti Support Group has been participating in the international campaign for debt relief for Haiti. However, the letters sent to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by our supporters have yet to convince these institutions that Haiti should be included in their list of countries eligible for debt relief.

Only 22 countries have been listed to take part in the much hyped, but disappointingly ineffective, heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative. Haiti is not one of them, despite the fact that it is paying US$60m a year to service its debt. Camille Chalmers of Haiti's Jubilee 2000 campaign told The Guardian, “While conditions for ordinary people are getting worse every day, this debt payment to the rich is immoral and profoundly unjust.”

In November 2000, the World Bank, responding to questions about Haiti's omission from the HIPC, said that in order to be included, “Haiti needs to make significant strides in strengthening governance and institutions, and show a commitment to reducing poverty.” Behind this rhetoric, they mean that the Haitian government should do what it is told, and accept the neo-liberal policy demanded by the the international financial institutions, and then, and only then, might debt relief be considered.

The IMF's report on Haiti published in early January 2001 recommended a reinforced structural adjustment policy, and said that “a good performance is an essential condition for new negotiations with the Haitian authorities and the reduction of Haiti's debt.” The Haitian Platform to Advocate for Alternative Development (PAPDA), a prominent backer of the Haitian Jubilee 2000 campaign, noted a change in the IMF’s discourse concerning Haiti’s external debt, and wondered optimistically if, at last, the IMF seemed to accept that Haiti is one of the most heavily indebted poor countries. Even if there are signs of a movement on this, the PAPDA called it absurd to bind the cancellation of Haiti's debt to the conditionalities of reinforced structural adjustment. The debt, the PAPDA pointed out, had to a large extent been created by the very policies dictated by the international financial institutions in the first place.

For more see: http://www.gn.apc.org/haitsupport/feacampaigns_index.html

Impunity battle: progress at last

The struggle to end the climate of impunity for those who have committed human rights abuses made significant progress late last year. Two important trials took place leading to convictions for atrocities committed in 1994 and 1999.

In May 1999, Haiti was shocked by the news that eleven people in the capital's Carrefour Feuilles district had been shot dead by members of the Haitian National Police. The Haiti Support Group, together with the development aid agencies, Action Aid, Save the Children Fund, and Christian Aid, wrote to President Préval and the Justice Minister demanding that a proper investigation be held in order to establish the facts about the incident. Human rights organisations also petitioned for the rule of law to be upheld. In the end, a hitherto unprecedented investigation did take place, and in September 2000, after a three-week trial, the former Port-au-Prince police commissioner and three other policemen were found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to three years in prison. Two other policemen were acquitted.

The second key trial was that of former army officers and paramilitaries implicated in the April 1994 Babouteau massacre. This long-awaited trial was based on several years of preparation by a mixed Haitian and international prosecution team. Beginning in September 2000, the trial concluded in November with the conviction of sixteen former soldiers and their cohorts. Twelve defendants—eight of them ex-soldiers—were sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour. Another four defendants received prison terms of between four and nine years. Six defendants were acquitted. The judge also ruled that all the convicted men's property would be confiscated if they fail to pay US$2,275 each in damages to fifteen victims — an amount 10 times the average annual income in Haiti.

A week later, the same court convicted thirty seven in absentia defendants of premeditated murder in connection with the Babouteau massacre. Those convicted include former coup leader Raoul Cidras and his close associate Philippe Biambay, who received asylum in Panama; former Port-au-Prince police chief Michel Francois, who is in Honduras; and paramilitary leader Emmanuel "Toto" Constant, who lives in New York City.

The Book of Vodou

by Leah Gordon
Published by Barron's Educational Series. ISBN 0-7641-5249-1
Price £10.50

'The Book of Vodou' is an engaging and colourful introduction to the much maligned Haitian religion. Illustrated by a combination of documentary photographs and fascinating art works, artifacts and sacred objects, the book provides an overview of the intricate ceremonies and rituals that make up the practice of Vodou. The religion has a pantheon of spirits who reign over different aspects of life, each with their own identity, ritualistic objects, songs and dances. A large part of the book is devoted to a captivating guide to the dominant spirits, tracing their characters and symbols, and relating their stories, songs and myths. This book is an attractive and accessible precursor to any in-depth study of Haitian culture.