Military calls Clinton’s bluff

Will the invasion of Haiti happen? Does anyone know? Does Clinton know? As we go to press, sources in Washington say it will be in mid-September at the earliest. The passage of the United Nations resolution authorising an invasion certainly increases the pressure on the Haitian military, and perhaps brings the restoration of President Aristide and democracy a step closer.

If a US-led invasion does go ahead, the whole nature of the Haitian crisis will change. The questions of the duration of the occupation, of an amnesty for the human rights violators in the military, of UN assistance to the Aristide government, of new elections, and a lot more besides, will come to the fore.

However a number of factors suggest that the current impasse may continue for some time yet. US public opinion remains opposed to military action. The Republican Party leadership, grubbing about waging war to protect oil interests in Kuwait, doesn’t give a damn about the murder and rape of the Haitian people.

Then there’s the drop in the number of refugees fleeing Haiti by boat. When there were hundreds leaving each day back in June and July the Clinton administration was motivated to do something, but the problem is over for now at least. The decrease has no doubt got a lot to do with the fact that would-be refugees face indefinite internment in the overcrowded and unsanitary camps at the US base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. It probably also has something to do with the US Embassy in Port-au-Prince relaying detailed information to the Haitian military on the whereabouts of boats and refugees preparing to leave.

More than anything, what’s maintaining the current deadly deadlock is the confidence on the part of the Haitian military that they can front out the threats and even solidify their position.

The idea that there would be serious military resistance to an invasion is just so much bunkum. But CNN and the other news networks lap up the staged demonstrations of armed volunteers practising on the capital’s streets and broadcast the images back to the US where they bolster the right wing’s anti-intervention case.

The Haitian military don’t believe that the US, still less the international community, possess any determination to restore Aristide as President. The word ‘bluff’ has now entered the Creole language and the US and the UN have a serious credibility problem. The military and their allies believe they can stare down the international community until Aristide’s term, which expires in February 1996, expires or becomes meaningless.

A worrying scenario is that General Cedras may voluntarily step down and be replaced by someone in his own likeness.

He has already declared he will resign next January. This would take the wind out of the sails of any invasion plan, and so maintain the military’s, and the de facto government’s, control. The rumour mill in Port-au-Prince has it that such a plan has already been prepared for when and if the prospect of invasion becomes a reality.

The illegal government is also planning to hold elections by the end of the year which, although they would not be internationally recognised, would further cloud the issue.

De facto President Jouannais may also be hoping to get the sanctions eased by highlighting the increasing danger of poor Haitians. One diplomatic source in Port-au-Prince said the military “expect the impact will be so dreadful in terms of the country’s poor that the American people will be revolted, particularly because the military and their allies will appear to be unaffected.” In July the de facto authorities began preventing the import of food shipments destined for delivery to the aid agencies which are feeding over a million Haitians each day.

As the United Nations prepare to send yet another representative to Haiti to issue yet another ultimatum, it is the Haitian people who continue to suffer the consequences of voting for the candidate of their choice.

Evan Paul, the mayor of Port-au-Prince, emerged from hiding after another attempt on his life to say, “If the vote of the people is not respected, how can people ever be expected to vote again.”
Araging success!

The first public performance in London by the Haitian roots music band, Boukan Eksperyans, was a raging success. The concert, organised by the Haiti Support Group, attracted an enthusiastic crowd of several hundred. A British audience dancing on a Monday night—it was more like Haiti than Highbury! The band enjoyed themselves despite anxieties caused by the US government's eleventh-hour refusal to issue entry visas, which forced them to cancel a 23-date tour. With all flights to Haiti suspended, the band were stuck in limbo until they were able to arrange to go to Jamaica where they are to begin recording their next album.

Manager Dan Beerman later wrote to the Haiti Support Group to say, “Everyone at our organisation did a superb job, we liked it very much...we were delighted and impressed by the way in which you handled everything.”

While in London the band took the opportunity to explain the significance of roots music in the struggle against dictatorship in Haiti with interviews for Radio Five Live, BBC World Service, GLR, The Guardian, and the European.

Singer Marjorie told the World Service programme, "Newshour. "You have to live in Haiti to feel the pressure but music helps people to have hope. We are not afraid to tell the truth in our music. We don't accept killing or stealing. The Haitian people have hope. They have the courage to fight against the 'machin entenal' (the dictatorship)."

Co-manager Daniel added, "The music is our way of communicating. When you’re talking about justice, about love, the (military) is it like you’re pointing a finger at them. Whenever you make someone think for the second time, they feel threatened. They feel insecure with this music because it brings people together."

On the question of a US invasion the band’s founder, Eddy, doubted that it would solve Haiti’s problems. "The US will probably replace the gays in power with another set of puppets. When American troops occupied Haiti between 1915 and 1934 they achieved nothing apart from helping to create the very institutions with which we have so many problems—the state and the army."
The only thing worse than no press at all is too much of it—an axiom surely borne out by coverage of Haiti in recent weeks. After months, even years, of ignoring the issue, Haiti was suddenly “hot” this summer.

However, much of the reporting bore the hallmarks of the worst excesses of the time of year—what the media label the “silly season.” The most obvious deficiency has been context. The fact that President Aristide was democratically elected by an overwhelming majority, improved the human rights situation immeasurably in just seven months of power, and began the long process of rebuilding Haiti, has been largely ignored in recent coverage.

Far more important to harness all the myths and stereotypes which, if repeated often enough, start to pass for facts. Consider this little gem from Peter Hitchens in the Daily Express. Aristide he says is an “anti-American rabble rouser who likes to threaten people with ‘necklacing’”. He goes on, “Haiti is the ultimate proof of the sad fact that some people are unable to govern themselves.” Poor Haiti, poor Hitchens.

Almost as ridiculous was the London Evening Standard’s well-intentioned but over-the-top report on August 4 which billed their man as “the first Western journalist to see the new killing fields at Titansen.” This waste ground outside Port-au-Prince, where death squad victims are occasionally left and where each week the city hospital morgue dumps unclaimed bodies, has been regularly visited by journalists for years.

Most of the journalists covering Haiti of late have given full reign to their laziness as well as their ignorance. If you venture no further than the Olloffson Hotel’s mahogany bar (carved incidently out of the full-size billiard table the American Gs left behind when their last occupation ended in 1934), it’s not unnatural to conclude that everyone in Haiti is against an invasion.

Aubin Jolicoeur, the Olloffson fixture and gossip-columnist portrayed as Petit Pierre in Graham Greene’s The Comedians, has done more for General Cedras’ public relations war than anyone actually in the military government. Anyone who has met him could detect his voice and political agenda in half the quotes used. One described President Aristide as a cross between “Idi Amin and the Singing Nun”, and another, the projected invasion as “Somalia Mark Two but with voodoo.”

The old journalistic hands knew better and showed it in getting out into Cite Soleil (the Port-au-Prince slum that remains an Aristide power base), and to the countryside. David Adams excelled himself in The Times outlining the scale and the nature of the resistance to military rule. He paraded Evans Paul (mayor of Port-au-Prince) and other Aristide grassroots activists to the 17th century “maroons”—slaves who escaped from the plantations to hide in the mountains from where they plotted the independence revolution.

Ed Vulliamy showed all his Bosnian experience in his first visit to Haiti for The Observer. Penetrating Cite Soleil and watching a World Cup match interspersed with slogans as “No to Occupation”, he elicited this remark from Edvelt, a young grassroots organiser. “We want to see an invasion by the US if it means the restoration of democracy and even if it means heavy loss of life among our partisans who would assist it.”

Newsweek kept up its enhanced reputation for Haiti coverage with a piece on August 8. The title said it all: “Notes from the Underground”. The subtitle was even more explicit: “Haiti: Trying to live long enough to topple the junta.” The article was a short but powerful analysis of the scale and success of the resistance, and the art of ‘marronage’—hiding. The piece included a mocking jibe from marronage’s prime exponent, Evans Paul. “We resist. We are not the ones that are losing.”

Finally there was the strange tale of The Guardian. Last year the liberal daily sacked the doyen of the Haiti press corps, Greg Chamberlain. This year it is paying the price. A piece by the unknown Anthony Milne (written from Britain) cast doubt on Aristide’s popularity and made an unforgivable factual error, claiming that the runoff in the December 1990 election was just 55% when in fact it was over 70%. Then there was The Guardian’s new star, Maggie O’Kane. Having become British journalist of the year for her reporting of Bosnia she was dispatched to Port-au-Prince to await the invasion. She kicked off with half the front page on July 30 to report nothing more than the departure of the last Air France flight out of Haiti. The piece looked more like the opening shot of the press award season than any serious effort to report Haiti, a fact borne out by a flawed, stereotypical editorial on the same day. The latter began, “Haiti is a hell hole of modern plagues and ancient curses”, but made no effort to analyze who might be responsible for Haiti’s condition or image. The media would be high up the list of culprits.

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Clinton pulls back from Haiti invasion