Coup leaders say yes—or is it maybe?

The United Nations plan to end the political deadlock in Haiti appeared to be back on course again after an eleventh hour volte-face by the coup leaders. The proposed plan, engineered over the preceding four months by the UN special envoy, Dante Caputo, and strongly backed by the Clinton Administration, would see ousted President Aristide restored to office, a concensus prime minister installed, and the military chiefs who led the coup resign. As a carrot the US and UN have offered a $1 billion five-year reconstruction programme, and an amnesty for those implicated in the murder of approximately 3,000 people since the 1991 coup.

New sanctions threat
In mid-April army leaders were reported to have rejected the deal claiming a lack of confidence in the amnesty offer. Exasperated diplomats issued dire warnings of the consequences, and threatened tough new sanctions such as freezing the assets abroad of the country’s pro-army elite, and cancelling their US entry visas.

Within days the deal was back on again. It remains unclear whether the coup leaders are engaged in deliberate delaying tactics, or whether the stronger tone adopted by Clinton and the US has persuaded the de facto regime that the time has finally come to withdraw. Certainly economic instability, including a 60% currency devaluation since the coup, and diminishing foreign investment in Haiti, has given some sections of the elite and the army second thoughts about the wisdom of continuing to govern illegally.

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Evans Paul, the elected mayor of Port-au-Prince, is one of the leading figures working for democracy in Haiti. At the end of March, fresh from the negotiations attempting to secure the return of President Aristide, he visited Britain at the invitation of the Haiti Support Group.

As a playwright and radio journalist, Paul was an outspoken critic of the former dictator, ‘Baby Doc’ Duvalier, and, as a result, suffered a series of arrests and beatings. After the fall of the Duvalier dynasty in 1986, he set up KID, an organisation which mounted demonstrations and launched a nationwide campaign of public education in civic awareness with widespread use of radio. Its work brought Paul into working contact with Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the ‘Ti Legliz’ (the grassroots Church).

The FNCD

When the 1990 elections were called, Paul set up the Fron: National pour le Changement et la Démocratie (FNCD), a coalition of parties, trade unions, peasant organisations and popular groups, including KID. Aristide, the FNCD’s candidate, easily won the presidential election, while Paul himself registered 85% of the vote to become the capital’s mayor.

Since the coup, he has become a target for the de facto regime. In October 1991 he was beaten senseless at Port-au-Prince airport in the presence of foreign journalists and diplomats. He has had to send his family into exile to Canada, but he himself resolutely refuses to be intimidated into leaving. He lives a life of semi-clandestinity in Port-au-Prince and is unable to carry out his duties as mayor. He now works as a member of the ‘presidential commission’, appointed to represent the exiled Aristide, and also invests considerable time in trying to rescue a near-chaotic parliament.

Paul described how the FNCD has attempted to continue its work in support of democracy. "We can’t function normally but we have not been driven underground. In the parliament the FNCD can count on the support of 25 out of the 91 Deputies, and 13 out of the 17 Senators. The party exists right across the country and beyond, in Miami, New York and Montreal."
Discontent and divisions

Speaking when a political settlement seemed imminent, Paul was cautiously optimistic about Haiti’s future. “You can tell things are changing. There are popular demonstrations in the streets, and the university faculties and high school campuses are seething with discontent. Some opportunistic politicians who went over to the other side when they thought they had won the day with their coup are beginning to siddle back to us. There are deep divisions within the army and in the business community – the two sectors which combined to bring about the coup.”

“When all this is over,” he said, referring to the period of de facto rule, “we are going to have to work very hard to build up political institutions. We need political parties, trade unions and above all a strong parliament. At present members of parliament are sometimes forced to vote with guns pointed at them by soldiers. We have seen much personal bravery shown by members of both Houses in these difficult days. But we all know that we must make our parliament work if we are to have any chance of having an effective democracy. It’s not just a matter of bringing Aristide back, though his return is essential. A weak or meaningless parliament would make it possible for a prime minister to do what they liked.”

No alternative to Aristide

He was very frank about Aristide, suggesting that the President had surrounded himself with weak and fawning advisers, and that he had been less than disciplined in what he said in public. “But he is still Haiti’s elected Head of State and there is no credible alternative without him. Besides, I know he’s learnt a great deal in these months of waiting.”

On the subject of the Church he sighed deeply. “If Haiti needs a strong parliament to face the future with confidence, we also need a strong Church. But the Church is totally discredited – it has behaved appallingly. It has watched the beating and imprisonment of priests, a public assault on one of its bishops, to say nothing of the killing and torture of thousands of Haitians, without flinching. The hierarchy has shown itself gutless.”

Just the beginning

Paul welcomed the intervention of the US and UN diplomats but realised that any settlement would be just the beginning. “We need a time of stability. The continuing presence of UN observers will help. But we must move at once to draw the teeth of the army and develop a separate police force. We shall have to embark on a crash course to train those capable of administering justice. Political institutions need to be built and their role clearly established. A unified and constructive Church would reassure many. There is an enormous amount to do.”

Asked if he had his eyes on the presidency one day, he laughed and said dismissively, “We call the presidency job cerveau (the coffin job) in Creole.” But he did not say no.

UN’s plan for Haiti is on again

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At present the implementation of the settlement is being held up over the question of amnesty for the perpetrators of the long catalogue of human rights violations. Aristide, under pressure to break the deadlock, reluctantly agreed to a political amnesty, and not to oppose expected efforts by parliament to extend the amnesty to civil crimes. Critics of the amnesty offer contend that justice cannot be constructed in Haiti on such foundations.

For their part, the army and their Macoute assistants fear that once Aristide returns, Haiti’s poor majority will seek violent revenge for the represion. While the top level leaders will secure their own safety, this apprehension on the part of the ordinary thugs would appear well-founded. The position of the army is further complicated by the deep involvement of the officers, down to the rank of captain, in the drug trade. Since the coup Haiti has grown in importance as a transhipment point in the illegal trade between South and North America and army officers are reluctant to lose out on the vast sums to be made from it.

In Haiti itself, opponents of the de facto regime have continued to demonstrate their support for democracy and its symbol, Aristide. Although undoubtedly emboldened in some cases by the presence of some 150 UN and OAS human rights monitors, there has been criticism by some grassroots groups of the strictly applied impartiality of the Observer Mission. While negotiations at a diplomatic level drag on, a new wave of violent repression has resulted in more deaths and injuries across the country.,

Resources

In the Parish of the Poor by Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Available from the Haiti Support Group, £10 incl. post & packaging.

The Price of Sugar: Haitian forced labour in the Dominican Republic – new resource pack produced by Anti-Slavery International. Free from ASI, 180 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AT.

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Book list detailing 40 English language publications on Haiti. Send a sae to the Haiti Support Group.

Haiti-Hebd – French language, weekly update on political developments in Haiti. Subscriptions: 6 months-£20, 1 year-£35. Send for a free sample: G. Chamberlain; Haiti-Hebd, 37 rue André Antoine, 75018 PARIS, FRANCE.
Refugees from Haiti: The scandal continues

Since May 1992 thousands of Haitians have been intercepted at sea by the US Coast Guard and returned to Haiti without any chance of proving that they are political refugees. Whole boatloads of returned refugees have been detained by the Haitian police after being deposited on the docks of Port-au-Prince by US Coast Guard cutters. Some have been held overnight in police lockups and others jailed for longer periods.

President Clinton has continued Bush’s executive order banning Haitian refugees and now the matter has been left in the hands of the US Supreme Court. Meanwhile, Haitians who made it to US territory before the blanket ban and who are held in detention camps until their applications for asylum are processed, have been protesting against discrimination and mistreatment.

Hunger strike

At the Krome Processing Centre in Miami there have been numerous hunger strikes by Haitians in an effort to draw attention to the disparate treatment of Cuban and Haitian refugees. On New Year’s Eve over 150 Haitian men and women began a hunger strike after 44 Cubans were released just one day after they arrived in Miami on a hijacked plane – Haitians are detained indefinitely and often returned to Haiti on the grounds that they do not have plausible claims to political asylum.

The hunger strike, and the treatment of the protestors by Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) staff, received a lot of media attention in the US. Less well known, however, is the tragic story of the 252 Haitians who have been incarcerated at the US Naval Base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, since they fled Haiti shortly after the September 1991 coup d’état.

Guantánamo

The US government alleges that 213 of these people are HIV positive. Although the INS has determined that all of them have “credible fears of persecution”, they are denied the opportunity of applying for asylum because of their HIV status. Medical experts throughout the world have denounced the HIV exclusion as scientifically groundless since HIV+ immigrants pose no health threat to the US public.

for freedom there must be some who die. We are prepared to die so that others can be free.”

Action

• Write to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Ms Ogata, and ask her to increase her demands for the Haitians at Guantánamo to be brought to the US.

Address: UNHCR, Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland.

• Write to the US Ambassador in the UK, Raymond Seitz, and remind him of the US’s obligation to respect the right of Haitian refugees to adequate medical treatment, and their right to access to the asylum procedure as laid down in the 1951 Refugee Convention. Point out that the restoration of democracy in Haiti is the first and most essential step towards the resolution of the refugee crisis. Address: US Embassy, 24 Grosvenor Square, London W1.

For more information send for the free briefing Haiti Insight published bi-monthly by The National Coalition for Haitian Refugees, 16 East 42nd Street, 3rd Floor, New York, N.Y. 10017-6907.

The Haiti Support Group

Please help us to continue producing these newsletters by sending us a donation, however small.

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For information about the activities of the Haiti Support Group in Liverpool contact Gerry Proctor, St Margaret Mary’s, Pilch Lane, Liverpool L14 0JG.