Unwanted Gifts: A Concise History of Harming Haiti

In October 2010, a United Nations Stabilisation Mission (MINUSTAH) base near Mirebalais polluted the Meille River with faecal matter. The excrement contained cholera bacteria. The MINUSTAH base was manned by 454 troops sourced from Nepal. Three weeks before they were deployed, cholera broke out in Nepal. The UN did not conduct a subsequent health screening. The infected faeces were then recklessly leaked into the arteries of Haiti’s main water basin.

The epidemic tore through Haitian society. To date, over one million Haitians have been infected, and close to 10,000 have died. The epidemic is far larger and has lasted far longer than the West African Ebola outbreak. The disease is not yet under control. Six years ago, cholera was unknown in Haiti. Today, it may now be endemic.

For years, the UN has dodged the blame. Last month, however, journalist Jonathan Katz discovered that the office of Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon had conceded that the UN was at fault for the initial outbreak and must consequently do much more to alleviate the suffering. A few days earlier, Philip Alston, NYU professor and “special rapporteur” to the UN, confidentially reported that “the scientific evidence points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the arrival of Nepalese peacekeepers and the outbreak of cholera are directly linked to one another.”

These leaks mark an exciting moment in advocacy work. For years grassroots groups inside and outside Haiti have called for the UN to acknowledge its negligence, work diligently to tackle the epidemic, and provide proper compensation to the victims and their families.

Cholera, however, is but the latest in a long line of unwanted gifts Haiti has received from the so-called “international community”. The well of their unfortunate generosity springs eternal. It is vital to grasp the history of international involvement in Haiti if we are to understand the crime of UN cholera and how they have (so far) gotten away with it.

The Indemnity
Haiti became independent in 1804, after the slaves of Saint Domingue threw off their shackles and overcame the French, British, Spanish and Napoleonic armies to claim their freedom. The first modern black republic was surrounded by slave colonies, and was within earshot of the plantations of the US South. The nation had many enemies. France refused to recognise the new state, and Haiti’s early leaders feared another visit from a French expeditionary force. Henri Christophe constructed an invincible fort at Milot, stocked with cannon, to ward off a potential French invasion.

Jean-Pierre Boyer, who succeeded Christophe, sought an alternative solution and requested French recognition. However, he was informed that France would not accept the existence of Haiti without a price. Boyer would have to buy Haiti’s freedom. The president acquiesced, and so it came to pass that Haiti would pay France an indemnity of 150 million francs that drained Haiti’s coffers and skewed its economy for the next century. The next time François Hollande talks vacuously about how it is impractical for France to pay Haiti reparations, think of this indemnity, and its legacy.

The Gunboat Diplomats
As the 19th Century wore on, Haiti became enveloped in imperial competition between the Great Powers. Britain and France had regained their taste for using the Caribbean as a plaything, and were joined by
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Part 1 – The cold war

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A few years later President Bill Clinton, in the spirit of free market competition, offered a special subsidy for US rice companies who exported their product to Haiti. Well and truly undercut, the Haitian rice farmers abandoned their crop for other pursuits. Many left for the city in an unlikely search for work. Piling into hastily erected shelters in the capital’s mushrooming shantytowns, thousands would fall victim to the earthquake of 2010.

Bel dan pa di zanni

A beautiful smile does not mean he’s a friend.

François Duvalier came to power in 1957, and until 1971 he held Haiti in a chokehold of terror. His enemies were disappeared, tortured inside the haunted walls of Fort Dimanche, or else chased out of the country by his paramilitary troop the Tontons Macoutes. JFK wanted him dead, but Richard Nixon affected to be fooled by Duvalier’s insistence that his victims were “communists,” and so Papa Doc found an ally in Tricky Dick.

When François died, he was replaced by his portly teenage son Jean-Claude, who lacked the authority of his father. Jean-Claudisme came to rely heavily on the assistance of the USA for its control over Haitian society. In return for a blind eye to Baby Doc’s kleptocracy, the USA – not for the first time – demanded Haiti be rendered “open for business.” US companies flocked to Haiti, establishing assembly plants in the Port-au-Prince suburbs to capture the labour of the city’s new arrivals for a dollar-a-day, if they were lucky. Haiti also became a leading destination for US sex tourism, and Duvalier’s Minister of the Interior Luckner Cambronne (nicknamed the “Vampire of the Caribbean”) found a foreign market for Haitian plasma, no questions asked.

The younger Duvalier came under increasing pressure from the Carter administration, and in the late-1970s was forced to enact moderate liberal reforms. Resistance sprouted in the grassroots movement, and criticism flourished on the radio waves, pioneered by Jean Dominique’s Radio Haïti Inter. Ronald Reagan, true to form, was friendlier to his plotters, usurpers and exploiters there than his victims were “communists,” and so Papa Doc found an ally in Tricky Dick.

But they face a daunting task: alongside the domestic “political class” of dictators, plotters, usurpers and exploiters there has always been a ready supply of foreign mediators who have disrupted and destabilised Haitian society for their own profit – often with criminal recklessness.

And still it continues. The USA has displaced Haitian farmers once again to build its grand Caracol Industrial Park. This temple of neoliberalism is the pet project of the Clintons, who still hold firm to their belief that Haitian society will progress with the gift of (exceedingly) low-paid manual labour – against decades of evidence to the contrary, and not just in Haiti. We should beware, wrote Jean Price-Mars in 1928, when “imperialism of every order disguises its lust under the appearance of philanthropy”. Hillary Clinton’s brother, meanwhile, is scoping Haiti for mining prospects, hoping to literally slice into Haiti’s soil and extract its riches.

To make sure Haiti remains “open for business” President Obama sent Secretary of State Clinton to Haiti during the 2011 presidential elections, to ensure that the most acquiescent candidate for US policy, Michel Martelly, made it onto the final ballot. Fast forward five years, they are at it again (see HB80).

The tragic reality is that Haiti, as a state and a society, is still cast as a “failure” in foreign eyes, and this status is often attributed to the actions of its people. In 2010, some acrobatically found fault with the Haitians for suffering the tremors of a natural disaster. This idea is so often justified by nods to Haiti’s troubled past and difficult present, and allows those such as the UN and the rest of the international community a degree of impunity for their atrocities. It is only to be expected, they argue, that a deadly disease like cholera should crop up in such a broken society. Yet for two centuries foreigners have peddled this excuse, blaming Haitians for the consequences of their own reckless actions.

In this context, the deliberate refusal of the United Nations to take responsibility for its cholera crime is even greater.

Haiti needs foreign resources to rebuild public services that have barely recovered from the decades of Duvalierism. It needs assistance to respond to severe agricultural challenges greatly exacerbated by the IMF and USA. It needs help to reconstruct Port-au-Prince, and it needs support in tackling the ongoing cholera epidemic. Haiti deserves assistance because it is a single country that has always been a ready supply of foreign mediators who have disrupted and destabilised Haitian society for their own profit – often with criminal recklessness.

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