US makes a mockery of justice

In a July interview with the US magazine, *Emerge*, Emmanuel Constant, the leader of the FRAPH death squad that murdered hundreds of Haitians in 1993-4, claims that his organisation is still operating in Haiti, and that, together with former soldiers, he is planning to engineer the return to power of former dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier. Meanwhile, in Haiti at the end of July, police arrested 10 people on suspicion of taking part in a plot against the government. The alleged ringleader, a former army colonel, remained at large.

July also saw the publication of the latest Amnesty International report on human rights in Haiti. The report notes that "perpetrators of human rights violations committed while the military were in power remain largely free and unpunished", and that "the failure to address the question of impunity for past human rights abuses, compounded by the failure to make speedy progress on the question of judicial reform...has created an atmosphere in which human rights violations continue to flourish." It concludes that "the future of human rights in Haiti is on the edge of a dangerous precipice."

Much of the blame for the parlous state of justice and the continuing climate of impunity in Haiti must be laid at the door of the Haitian government. As Father Daniel Roussière of the Gonâves Justice and Peace Commission told *Haiti Info*, "If there were a World Cup for impunity, I think that the Minister of Justice and the Haitian authorities would at least get to the quarter-finals, without a doubt to the semi-finals and maybe they would even win the World Cup of Impunity."

However, the bragging of FRAPH leader, Constant, and the suggestion that members of the former military are still politically active and dangerous, focuses attention once more on the cynical double game being played by the United States. In 1995, the US began funding a five-year $18 million programme to reform the judicial system, yet, at the same time, Washington is blatantly obstructing the very process of Haitian justice.

Constant, the acknowledged former CIA employee, faces charges of murder, torture and arson in Haiti, and the Haitian government has asked for his extradition from his current home in New York. But the US suspended a deportation order, and then agreed that Constant could remain in the US with a work permit and "self-deport" at any time to a third country of his choice, effectively allowing him to escape justice. The US decision flouts its commitment under the United Nations torture convention to extradite or bring to trial suspected torturers.

Then there are the 160,000 pages of documents taken from the Haitian Army and FRAPH offices by US troops in 1994. Washington insists they will be returned only after the names of US citizens have been excised, apparently for the illegitimate purpose of covering up US complicity in political murder and other abuses. The former US ambassador to Haiti has stated that information identifying US citizens has already been removed from 113 pages. The Haitian government has asked for the return, in their entirety, of the documents, which contain important evidence needed for the prosecution of cases against the military and paramilitary leaders.

AN EXILE'S STOY

FRANCILIAN PAUL has lived in the UK since 1993, having fled his native Haiti in 1991 following the military coup. Earlier this year he returned for the first time to visit family and friends in his hometown of Limbe, outside the northern city of Cap-Haitian. Back in the UK, Paul told his story and shared his impressions of the current situation with Haiti Briefing. Like many young Haitians at the end of the 1980s, Paul was actively engaged in community initiatives to bring about social and political change. After graduating from the Baptist college in Cap-Haitian in 1989, he founded a school in the village of Bas Limbe. "I saw the deprivation there. Kids were wandering around naked in the streets. There was no school and children had to walk about eight miles to the nearest one. So I said to my friend we can start something there, and with just twenty Haitian dollars we started up, and enrolled about 80 young girls and boys." Paul was also an active member of a youth organisation in Limbe which held regular meetings to discuss social injustice and how to deal with harassment from the police and section chiefs. He was inspired by the activities of the Catholic Ti Legiz community organisations. "I liked their philosophy of giving up from village discussing the way people could change their situation and deal with problems with the military."

On a death list
At every meeting his organisation held, there were "uninvited guests checking in on us." A few days after the September 30 1991 military coup against the recently elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a friend who was a surgeon in the Haitian Army called to tell Paul that his name was on a death list prepared by a colonel in Cap-Haitian. "He told me that if I didn't leave I would be in trouble. They said they were killing everybody who was working with people to stand up for their rights." Paul fled to the United States and was granted political asylum. "I was lucky to have the chance to escape. As I was leaving to get to Cap Haitian airport, I saw the bodies of three young people in the street. Their blood was running along the road. When I got to the US, I was so shook up when I heard that others had arrived on the beaches of Florida and had been sent to Krome (Miami detention centre) while Cubans were getting full political status."

Paul hoped to return to Haiti once the situation improved but the crisis dragged on, and in 1992, he met a French woman, who came to live in Cardiff, south Wales. "It was a real culture shock because in Miami there was a Haitian community but in Cardiff I didn't meet a single Haitian."

A shocking situation
During over six years abroad, Paul kept in contact with his family and friends in Haiti, but nothing could prepare him for the changes he experienced when he returned for the first time in early 1998. "It was shocking. The first shock was the poverty level. As soon as I got off the plane in Port-au-Prince I was shocked to see the massive relocation of people from the countryside to the capital. Then there is the insecurity. There is no safety in the streets, there are killings at night, and the situation has deteriorated since I was last there. Because of the poverty, there are some people who don't care about human life.”

In Limbe, Paul's friends and former associates expressed their disappointment with the current situation. "There are some peasant and youth groups in Limbe that are so frustrated and angry because they thought that when Aristide came back in 1994 that things were going to get better. They thought the cost of living would go down, and that parents would be able to send their children to school, but nothing has changed. The Limbe people were expecting much more from the US invasion."

As in Port-au-Prince, the issues of insecurity and impunity were major concerns. "The army has been abandoned but the criminals who tortured and killed young people have not been judged or jailed but are walking free. I met a woman in Limbe who lost her son. Some men came at night, took him away, and the next day he was found dead on the beach at Cap-Haitian with two bullet wounds. She has tried to find justice but so far there is no answer. People are really upset. They are disappointed that there was a disbandment of the Macoutes who used to beat and arrest young men. They still have their weapons and kill people at night."

Levi ché
The other main issue for Limbe residents, says Paul, is the problem of living. "Life is so expensive, I don't know how the poor survive. Haitian soil is fertile and if we had a good irrigation system we could provide food for all the population. But when I went there it was only US rice and US chicken. Everything in the market is too expensive. That's OK for those who have some import business but for the masses it's bad. They can't afford it, and Haitian farmers are discouraged because their goods are not worth anything at the market. Food can be produced, so why buy it from the US?"

Some people told Paul that they now feel the invasion only served the interests of the middle class. There is disappointment too that Aristide did not achieve more when he returned. "Some people expected too much of Aristide, expected miracles. In general, people are very disillusioned with Haitian politicians who make promises but never do anything. Having said that, some still expect things from Aristide in the future, remembering that he did not have a full term as President."

Noting that both the Ti Legiz community organisation and his youth group are still active in Limbe, Paul retains his faith in the Haitian people's own organisations. "They are determined, and are fighting for a better future. They must take the lead and not expect international organisations to do it for them. People expect too much from foreigners."

Life in Britain
Paul hopes to return to Haiti some day to make his contribution but for the moment he is making a life for himself in London. "It's not easy here in the UK. I can feel lonely even with people around me. I've only met four Haitians here and a few Haitians from France. Some British people don't even know where Haiti is. It's bizarre, because Haiti is the first black country to take its independence, yet it seems few people know this story. Even people from neighboring Caribbean islands don't know much about Haiti."

One thing most people in Britain connect with Haiti is Vodou, and Paul can scarcely contain his frustration with the level of prejudice he encounters. "It's a question of cultural identity. When the slaves organised themselves to deton their masters they gathered together around Vodou. People don't understand. You have to take things in their context, and even as a Christian you still retain your identity and your ancestral identity. The evangelists try and make Haitians forget their roots and their culture, but Haitians should say they are proud of Vodou. It is a religion of the oppressed, and a religion of resistance... Remember the Vodou priest who helped defeat slavery, Vodou stood up for them. It was a force, and I am proud of Vodou."

Photo by Leah Gordon.
NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR CHAINS, WHITE SLAVES

review of Vodou Nation press coverage

by PHILLIP WEARNE

Spirits in the material world

You don’t have to be out of yer head, but it helps

VOODOO YOU BELIEVE?

Dance with the dead

1804. "They (Haitians) know it seems sinister and scary to outsiders and as they feared reoccupation by Europeans, they have played up to the image.” Go along to event, Ms Gordon urged, people had "nothing to lose except their own prejudices.”

It was left to Time Out in a preview headlined “Fear of Music” to get under the skin of this prejudice. Reciting the importance of Vodou in Haitian history, the listings magazine drew a salutary conclusion. “So here we have Vodou as an empowering force exclusively understood by black people - and you wonder why it gets a bad press in the West?” The “Holy Willies” were “just like the slave-owners who outlawed traditional African religions.” And look where that got them, one might add. As dead as Vodou is alive.

Perhaps embarrassed by their ignorance, critics tried a new tack quickly picked up by the press. Vodou means animal sacrifices, they mused. Surely that was illegal? No, retorted Como No!, the company promoting the events. These were vegetarian, sacrifice free ceremonies. Julia Llewellyn Smith in The Sunday Telegraph recorded the disappointment of some of the audience at all this. “Is that all?” asked one woman. “I thought I was going to see a goat sacrificed.”

The Sunday Telegraph’s was one of a number of long balanced features. Llewellyn Smith mentioned “the near hysteria” that had greeted the event in passing then went on to dispel the myth by spending a day with Vodou priest Edgar Jean-Louis and his team as they discovered the delights of Hackney’s Ridley Road market. Other papers, such as The Times and The Independent had sent reporters out to Haiti before the event, snapping detailed profiles of the Haitian dimension of Vodou. It was The Independent that pursued one of the most fascinating lines, asking what the visit to Britain meant. Since being recognised as an official religion in 1987, Vodou cultural acceptance has never been higher, abroad as well as at home. But could real Vodou travel and, as performance art, could it ever be the real thing, The Independent’s Philip Sweeney asked.

The Guardian built on this theme and linked it with the tenet of the short promotional pieces that appeared in many of the listings club magazines. These saw it all as something different, a cultural, educational event with religious overtones. “We’ve had jungle and trance, Could you be the next sensation?” asked Matthew Kershaw in The Guardian. If the search for the new is all in clubland Bagley’s Studios, the London venue has held “fetish parties, transvestite gatherings, even happy hardcore nights,” noted The Big Issue - the answer seems to be yes. In the July issue of The Wire Mike Shawcross reported that as “the ceremonial pulse rippled across the different beats of three drums...I feel the hair rising on the back of my neck.”