Is the US serious?

The United States has added teeth to the new United Nations sanctions imposed in May by announcing it will assist the Dominican Republic to seal the border it shares with Haiti, and by suspending commercial flights and banning money transfers. Supporters of President Aristide welcomed these measures, but it remains to be seen whether they will be enough to persuade the Haitian military to stand down. Even after the new UN sanctions came into effect ships and tankers continued to arrive at Jacmel. This port on the southern coast receives over 40% of the estimated four million gallons of gasoline being smuggled into Haiti. The Clinton administration at last appears to be losing patience with Haiti’s military leaders and speculation is mounting that if the sanctions don’t work there will be some sort of US military action.

Meanwhile, the US has unveiled its new plan to deal with the thousands of Haitians fleeing the country. Refugees intercepted by the US Coast Guard will be processed aboard ships moored off Kingston, Jamaica, and the British Grand Turk Island to the north of Haiti. In an agreement signed with the British Turks and Caicos Islands authorities the US will establish an onshore refugee processing centre on Grand Turk in exchange for a cash payment. The Turks and Caicos Islands Chief Minister Charles Missick claimed that the agreement would “provide assistance in helping us rid ourselves of the large number of Haitian illegals who are already here.” Between two and four thousand refugees have arrived in the Turks and Caicos Islands since the 1991 coup in Haiti.

Refugee advocates claim that the US eligibility requirements will prevent all but the highest profile political activists from even qualifying for an asylum hearing, and that at least 95% of the refugees will be repatriated. In effect the so-called ‘new’ policy will merely mean a change of venue. Whereas previously the only processing of asylum applications occurred in Haiti, now it will also take place on the ships and on Grand Turk. Returned refugees will remain highly vulnerable to illegal arrest, detention and worse once they are put ashore in Port-au-Prince. As ever the solution to the refugee problem remains the restoration of democracy and therefore prompt return of Aristide.
Six o'clock and the shooting starts. It must be time for the first run punch of a long evening. Sometimes the balcony of the Hotel Oloffson seems far removed from the root-put-a-prize that it overlooks. But then a shot bursts out from close to the wall and the more cavalier journalists run out to investigate. The riot squad and back inside and up to the bar and wait for the band to play.

Music has an important place in Haitian politics, especially since 1968 and the expulsion of Baby Doc. ‘Les Racines’, meaning simply ‘roots’, is a movement involving artists and musicians in Haiti. They are influenced by Voodoo, the ancient spirit religion brought from Africa by the slaves. Naive artists have been using the pantheon of Voodoo gods for their inspiration for decades, but this is the first time that modern bands have done the same. The music sounds more African than Caribbean—some of the rhythms and melodies have survived the hundreds of years since the journey from Dahomey and of the spirits.’

‘Racines’ is taking over from the Merengue-inspired Compas music in much the same way that Reggae has taken over from Calypso in Jamaica at the time of independence. Compas was an acceptable form of music for the Dublair era. ‘If you look at the lyrics of Compas they talk about vacations and women and that’s it. Forget about social realities, politics, poverty—forget about everything’, says Thugor Theodat, saxophone player in the group, Foula. ‘In Haiti you have a middle class and elite that have a neo-colonial mentality. They want to put down anything that sounds African, anything that reminds us of our African heritage.’

When Hait riid itself of the Dublair dictatorship there was a cultural as well as a political revolution. Richard Morais, one of the lead singers of RAM, a hypnotic Voodoo rhythm with electric guitars and afro-pop, reggae, acid and gospel music. The ten-piece band was in a punk band in New York. Opening for bands like the Gang of Four and Bow Wow Wow did nothing however to prepare him for the political milieu in Haiti. He started managing the fabled Hotel Oloffson in Port-au-Prince, the setting for Graham Greene’s novel, ‘The Comedians’. The hotel was the perfect vehicle for the music. ‘Bookman, Sambayou, Foula, were hanging out, but when I acquired the hotel I created a venue from which to push the bands.’ This was the break that the Racines bands needed.

RAM have been called a ‘Veloett Underground with Voodoo drive’. Recently one of RAM’s songs, ‘Bo Lele’, was chosen as the soundtrack for the Jonathem Immel film, ‘Philippines’. The current military authorities have been quite enthusiastic about RAM’s biggest hit in Haiti, ‘Tay’, (creole for faith). The lyric goes, ‘I only have one son and they made him leave the country’, and can be read as a veiled anthem for the return of President Aristide. Richard has been run up and told, ‘For 30 cents you’re dead.’ More recently some members of RAM have taken to changing address habit. Richard is adamant, ‘If they will stop what they’re doing, I’ll have no need to become a regular fixture at their concerts. In April 1993, during a concert for about 10,000 people, Bookman received an ultimatum from the police commander to leave the stage in five minutes, but they played on. Soldiers lobbed tear gas into the audience, causing a stampede towards the exits, but most of the youths refused to leave. They tied their bandanas over their noses and mouths, and kept on dancing. Bookman truly seem to embody the Haitian people’s spirit and defiance.

Carnival—the peoples’ party

Whatever deprivation the Haitians must endure, no authority would dare to deny them Carnival. In Haiti, it is only the institution in Haiti that cannot be negotiated,” said the director of a Voodoo priest and drummer who has authority on the country’s popular culture. “The government that parades on the parades and feels that it is secure in its lavishness, but history tells us that this is not a necessity for their rototory. Life is highly perilous for some of the less prominent bands from the slums. Yet they continue to voice their protests in allegory and metaphor, which still have the power to make dictators sweat. As Richard Morais commented, “Parables is essential in a society where there is great repression.”
What we do...

If you have ever wondered what the Haiti Support Group (HSG) does, here is a brief résumé of what we've been up to in the last few weeks.

HSG members' news film

Two members of the HSG filmed a news piece about the situation in Haiti in May which was broadcast on Channel Four News, by Sky TV and RTE (Ireland). Their report included news of the appalling use of rape as weapon of political terror and of the repatriation of Haitian refugees from the Bahamas.

Meetings

Members of the HSG have spoken at public meetings about Haiti in Oxford, Bradford and Harpenden, Herts, and have participated in meetings organised by Caribbean Labour Solidarity, Black History for Action, Camden Nicaragua Association and the City Lit Institute. A full colour visual display consisting of eight lightweight boards covering Haitian history, politics and the human rights and environmental situations is now available for use by local groups. Please contact the Haiti Support Group for details of the visual display and to book speakers for meetings.

HSG member in the news in Haiti

A HSG member who worked as a United Nations human rights monitor in Haiti last year made the news when the Haiti Progrès weekly newspaper and Radio Tropic FM both picked up an interview published by the British Campaign against Militarism. The interview includes his suspicions that the UN civilian mission was used to gather information about political activists, and his belief that the UN policy as a whole is having a very negative effect on the popular movement in Haiti. It was published in full in Haiti Progrès, one of the three weeklies distributed in Haiti, and reported as a major news story by Tropic FM, the only station broadcasting independent news. A spokesperson for the Haitian Information Bureau commented "...it comes at a crucial time when more and more people are (finally) realising the real game going on here."

Bishop Romelus for the Nobel Peace Prize

Bishop Willy Romelus of Jérémie has been officially proposed for the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize. Bishop Romelus is the only Catholic bishop in Haiti to fully support the oppressed and speak out against the repressive regime established after the military coup. He is one of the few members of the Catholic Church hierarchy to have continued to search for information and express himself in a just and brave manner, usually at risk of being imprisoned or losing his life. The HSG has written to the Nobel Peace Institute in support of the candidacy of Bishop Romelus. For more information contact the HSG.

The Refugee Council

In May the Haiti Support Group briefed the committee of the Refugee Council on recent developments in Haiti. Expressing concern about the repatriation of Haitian refugees by the US Coast Guard and the Bahamas authorities, the HSG encouraged the Refugee Council director Al F Dubs to take part in an international delegation to the region in July and recommended that the delegation visit the British Turks and Caicos Islands. Up to four thousand recently arrived Haitians face imminent repatriation from the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Teachers wanted for Haiti resource

Haiti—the richest colony in the Caribbean—the first successful slave revolt—the first black republic—occupied by the US—ruled by the Duvaliers—inspired by Aristide's vision—and now suffering under military rule.

We would like to produce a small resource for use in the English, Media Studies or History parts of the national curriculum. If you are interested in helping this project - writing, advising or some other form of support—please contact us. We are open to suggestions. Please contact HSG or Margaret Burr - Tel: 081 981 0183 extn. 4980.

Join the Haiti Support Group

Please help us to continue our work by becoming a member of the Haiti Support Group. In addition to receiving our bi-monthly Haiti Briefing we can provide you with all the up to date news from Haiti and the US on request.

Published by the Haiti Support Group

Trinity Church, Hodford Road, London NW11 SNG
Tel & fax: 081 201 9878

Printed by East End Offset Ltd, London E3
Tel: 0171 339 5353 Fax: 0171 339 5354