

In the Shadow of Aristide

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9 March 2005

The Toronto Star

English

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A year after overthrow of Haiti's president, violence still rules the poorest nation in the hemisphere, The one-year anniversary of the overthrow of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was marked by events all too familiar to the poorest nation in the hemisphere - events that should give Canadians pause to reflect on our role in Haiti's ongoing tragedy.

On March 2, Haitian police fired on a peaceful demonstration in the capital slum of Bel-Air, killing three and wounding several more, bringing the death total to nearly 30 in just five days.

The demonstrators were calling for the return of Aristide and the fulfillment of the five-year mandate to which he was democratically elected in 2000 - a common refrain among Haiti's many impoverished slums, where support for Aristide and his Family Lavalas party is strongest.

That demand has often met similar responses from the Haitian police.

For Canadians who value a decent and humane foreign policy, last week's violence should be of as much concern as the silence that greeted it in Ottawa.

The Martin government has refused to condemn Aristide's ouster in the pre-dawn hours of Feb. 29, 2004, choosing instead to back an interim government that enjoys almost no popular support.

Observers now widely agree that "the situation - politically, economically and in terms of security - has deteriorated dramatically," the head of the U.N. mission in Haiti from 1993 to 2000 told the BBC.

When I visited Bel-Air the day before Christmas, I found the once-bustling, vibrant community to be a veritable ghost town, its near-empty streets traversed only by scattered pedestrians and patrolling U.N. peacekeepers.

The scene was testament to a largely ignored fact of life after Aristide: There has been not just a coup against the president, but a purge of the populist Lavalas party that elected him.

An exhaustive study by the University of Miami's Centre for Human Rights found that "the police routinely enter (poor neighbourhoods) to conduct operations, which are often murderous attacks, often with firepower support from the U.N. Civil Police and peacekeeping forces," while their victims "prefer to die at home untreated rather than risk arrest at the hospital."

Following the coup, thousands of state workers lost their jobs, while hundreds of elected Lavalas politicians were forced from their positions, many at gunpoint.

The Catholic Church's Justice and Peace Commission estimates there are more than 700 political prisoners in Haitian jails.

Visiting one of them, 70-year-old folksinger So Anne Auguste, a veteran of decades of struggle against the Duvalier dictatorships, was particularly unnerving.

Not far from the Petionville penitentiary where she has been held since last May without charge, Prime Minister Paul Martin had told reporters during his brief visit to the country in November that "there are no political prisoners in Haiti."

It is possible that the Martin government is simply unaware of the situation.

But the extent of its involvement gives reason to draw other conclusions.

During the final years of Aristide's rule, Canada followed the lead of Paris and Washington in reducing foreign aid to a trickle, offering a paltry \$23.85 million in 2003.

By contrast, Martin recently pledged \$180 million over the next two years.

Since July, Canada has provided training for the Haitian police and logistical planning for the U.N. force that has been backing them.

On Dec. 2, the Brazilian U.N. commander complained of being "under extreme pressure from the international community to use violence" to quell Haiti's unrest, naming Canada, among others.

Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew has left no ambiguity over who we have in mind, telling Parliament in October that the "extreme violence" has been "carried out by armed groups, primarily the chimeres," the derogatory French term applied to armed supporters of Lavalas.

Pettigrew has said nothing about the aggressive tactics of the Haitian police and little of the paramilitaries and former soldiers closely aligned with the wealthy Haitian opposition.

There is little doubt that Aristide, who has his critics as much from the Haitian left as from the right, was involved in - or at least tolerant of - corruption and human rights abuses during the waning years of his rule.

But his competence is an issue solely for Haitians to decide.

Haiti's struggling democracy should be respected, not subverted; the voices of its slums heeded, not silenced.

As Father Gerard Jean-Juste, a Haitian priest who spent 48 days in prison under the interim government, told reporters shortly before police fired at the demonstrating crowd:

"The people are revolting only to ask for what they voted for."

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