

ZNet | Haiti

On the way home from Haiti

by Tom Driver; April 05, 2004

Tom Driver has visited Haiti many times, and just returned from a delegation that was in the country between March 23 - April 2, 2004. This is a letter he wrote on his flight home.

Haiti exists, but not happily. Before getting home to all my catching-up, I want to send you some news about the Haiti. I have been visiting since March 23, when I came down with the first non-governmental delegation that's gone there since the United States forcibly removed Pres. Aristide on Feb. 29. The delegation was put together by "Haiti Reborn," an arm of The Quixote Center in Maryland.

Haiti has suffered a terrible humiliation at the hands of the U.S. Although her poverty is bad enough, it does not wound the psyche as do recent events that amount to a kind of political/military rape of the country. The clock of Haitians' self-government has been set back at least 50 years. On the surface, life can appear rather normal, but awful fears and hatreds lie just underneath, ready to ensnare or explode. For example:

One day when we returned in our van to the house where we lodged, a visitor cautioned that someone was watching the house and street -- something we had not noticed and weren't sure whether to believe. Our visitor had brought with him, for an interview with us, two men who were prominent in Pres. Aristide's Lavalas political party. Since Aristide's ouster over a month ago, one of the men has not dared sleep in the same house two nights running. He quit our meeting early so as to stay on the move. Later that day we found out that his name was read out on the radio, which is like being marked for death. Every afternoon around 4 p.m. names are broadcast. Perhaps they are on a list of those whom the new government wants to arrest, or perhaps listeners call in with the name of so-and-so. All are linked with Aristide in some way. Some of those named soon disappear. Today most of Haiti's radio stations have fallen silent, while the remaining ones are owned by members of "the opposition," which of course is no longer in opposition to the government, because during the night of February 28-29 the United States brought about a regime change in Haiti.

Although there is a "transitional" President in the National Palace (we met with him), the building is mostly occupied by U.S. Marines, who also patrol the streets and the airport, and fly helicopters almost constantly over the poorer parts of Port-au-Prince night and day. U.S. forces have made many night-time raids into some of the poorest quarters, particularly the one called Belair. In these raids they have killed an uncertain number of people, estimates going as high as 70. Occasionally the foreign soldiers venture into middle class neighborhoods, but never threaten the houses on the hills where the wealthy live.

We met with groups very loyal to Aristide and groups who hate him, but only one group, which is dominated by wealthy businessmen, failed to condemn in the strongest terms the occupation of Haiti by the U.S.-led multinational force. It is an insult to Haiti's spirit of freedom and self-worth; and it has come, perhaps not by accident, during the 200th anniversary of Haiti's declaration of independence in 1804.

In the States, it seems that only the Congressional Black Caucus has been willing to speak of Aristide's removal as a coup. John Kerry did come close on CBS on the morning of Feb. 29, when Dan Rather asked all the Democratic candidates what they thought about Aristide's removal, which had happened during the previous night. Kerry rightly said that the Haiti crisis had been created by Pres. Bush, because his administration had put lots of pressure on Aristide and none on his opponents, both

armed and unarmed. Bush thus empowered the opposition to refuse all compromise, making a negotiated solution impossible. I hope Kerry will stand by this analysis and continue to hold Bush accountable. Although it is true that the game plan began at least as far back as the year 2000, before Bush came in, it was his team, including Colin Powell, that pursued it to its bitter and very cynical end.

I have followed this matter from its inception, and I will somewhere write in more detail about the Washington-based plot that has been so disastrous for the dreams of democracy that arose in Haiti during the 1980s and 90s. Suffice it to say that the "rebels" who came over the border from the Dominican Republic in February could not have been trained, supplied, and strategically prepared without the foreknowledge, and probably the assistance, of the United States. That said, I want here to relate just a few of the things I discovered in Haiti the past ten days.

- The country is shockingly divided in political opinion. It is weird to leave one interview and go into another in which you are told the exact opposite of what was said in the first. Our interlocutors might begin a session saying reasonable things, but before long their claims would become so extreme as to defy all belief. This includes people with high levels of education who are widely traveled in the world. We heard torrents of hatred and vilification, especially from Aristide's detractors, and from others we heard and saw expressions of fear.
- Most of the Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that rail against Aristide have been getting money from USAID via the International Republican Institute, or the National Democratic Institute, all of which disperse U.S. Government money.
- Aristide made serious mistakes as President. It seems likely that his administration included unknown amounts of corruption, drug traffic involvement, and (as his hold on power grew weaker) reliance upon armed gangs from slum neighborhoods that looked upon him as a deliverer. He was, no doubt, a charismatic leader with poor administrative skills.
- Even so, he was far from being the tyrant, dictator, and despot that his opponents and much of the U.S. press paint him to be. What kind of a tyrant is it whose most popular move was to disband the army?
- One of Aristide's accomplishments was to establish a new school of medicine. The U.S. military has closed it and uses it as a barracks. This in a country in desperate need of doctors.
- When Aristide was taken away, he received assurance that his house would be protected. It was immediately trashed and looted. By contrast, in 1994 the houses of Gen. Cedras and other military officers whom the U.S. ousted from power were guarded by U.S. soldiers.
- There is no effort by the U.S.-led multinational force or the Haitian police to arrest the known criminals among the armed rebels who played the key role in bringing down the government. Not only are all the rebels insurrectionists who took up arms against a legitimate government, some of their leaders had previously been tried and convicted of politically motivated crimes. Upon entering Haiti from the Dominican Republic, they released about 2000 more criminals from jail. Staff at the U.S. Embassy told us that to capture and disarm them is not part of the mission of the U.S. forces. Meanwhile, the mission does include the use of lethal force against militants in the slums who were loyal to Aristide.
- Aristide's opponents come from the left as well as the right. He tried to bring the disparate factions together, but the elite, whether leftist or rightist, turned against him for not serving their interests. He found his base of support in the urban masses, whom he had once served as priest in the "parish of the poor" at the Church of St. Jean Bosco in Port-au-Prince. He seems to have had less solid support among the rural peasantry.
- The issue that concerns me is not whether Aristide was everything that Haiti

needs. He clearly was not. The issue is whether the United States has the right to undermine and then destroy a duly elected government. I am ashamed of my country for having done so, and I'm very angry about it.

- Although the transitional government talks of inclusiveness and power sharing, the cabinet it has appointed includes no members of Aristide's faction.
- The new cabinet's Minister of Security is Herard Abraham, a General in the army that Aristide disbanded in 1995. This is the clearest of several indications that the U.S. intends for Haiti's army to be reinstated. It was, and surely would be again, a proxy army trained and equipped by the U.S. for the purpose of quelling social unrest in the population.
- Finally, a Catholic priest who has remained close to Aristide throughout his political career told us that Haiti "must" create and train a movement of nonviolent resistance. Although Aristide did not think along that line, the time for doing so seems to be at hand.

Whenever I go to Haiti I come home with some reason for hope in the midst of desperation. This time, it's the discovery that some Haitians are dreaming of a nonviolent way to renew their struggle for democracy and true independence. We can help them by working to get the U.S. out of the business of regime change. It is shameful for a superpower to bully other nations, especially one as small, as impoverished, and as eager for self-rule as Haiti.