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Council On Hemispheric Affairs

MONITORING POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND DIPLOMATIC ISSUES AFFECTING THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

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Another Failed Washington Regime Change: Haiti's Caricature of Democratic Governance

- On Sunday, June 20, a U.N. peacekeeping mission led by Brazil will take over command authority in Haiti from U.S. forces, which have witnessed an alarming deterioration of the political and economic situation on the island in recent weeks.
- The ongoing chaos highlights the hapless leadership of Prime Minister Gerald Latortue and his Rasputin-like Justice Minister Bernard Gousse, as well as the persistence of a host of unanswered questions about the ambience of violence surrounding February's forced transfer of power and Aristide's flight into exile.
- Under Gousse, the human rights situation in Haiti remains deplorable, even though the more overt violence has now subsided. Significant numbers of Aristide supporters, in the many hundreds if not more, have been murdered in Port-au-Prince, while convicted criminals, former paramilitary leaders and other vigilantes retain effective control of most of the Haitian countryside.
- The new government has eagerly aligned itself with the coalition of thugs that ousted Aristide, making few efforts to prosecute them for their manifest human rights abuses or return to prison those who already have been convicted. Meanwhile, Gousse parades around barking out orders regarding issues far beyond his control, pretending to be a bona fide figure with authentic legitimacy while he devotes his days to fabricating charges against Aristide.
- Washington's venerable tradition of benign neglect when it comes to Haiti kicks in,

with much-hoped for international aid not materializing. It remains far from clear whether the international community will make the investments needed in Haiti to avoid another devastating cycle of instability and violence, though the Canadian card has yet to be played.

• The resources and manpower brought to bear on this crisis by the U.N. peacekeeping mission are disappointingly meager thus far, and given the highly biased nature of Secretary-General Annan's recent report on Haiti—which reads as if it was drafted by Haiti's ultra-conservative business leader and Group 184 coordinator Andy Apaid—the U.N.'s commitment to the reestablishment of genuine democracy in Haiti appears highly questionable.

Kidnapping by Any Other Name. . .

On June 20, a U.N. peacekeeping force will take over day-to-day command authority in a battered Haiti, which continues to limp from crisis to crisis four months after February's abrupt and violent "regime change." Yet ever since the sudden replacement of former Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide in the early morning hours of February 29 and the simultaneous arrival of a contingent of U.S. Marines in this war-torn country for the second time in ten years, Western political leaders, veteran journalists, and most members of Congress and opinion-makers in Washington and across the hemisphere have demonstrated a notable lack of curiosity about the real story behind how Aristide lost his presidency, an event that there is good reason to believe represented the thirty-third coup in Haiti's bitter history. While the U.S.-backed politicians now running Haiti—a mix of unsuitable technocrats like Prime Minister Gerard Latortue and lethal ideologues like Minister of Justice Bernard Gousse—promise an era of disciplined, apolitical technocracy, they in fact spend perhaps most of their time attempting to besmirch Aristide. Moreover, they show few signs of being even remotely interested in ascertaining exactly what the fate was of the last elected government, much less the role of the U.S. in forcing the transfer of power.

Yet the situation changed on June 8, when the Organization of American States—a normally rather moribund organization that under outgoing Secretary-General Cesar Gaviria has become little better than a regional policy-making appendage of the State Department—approved a resolution calling for an investigation into the circumstances of former President Aristide's departure. This initiative was passed despite the Bush administration's incessant admonitions that political recriminations should be avoided in order to prioritize rebuilding Haiti's democratic institutions, a declaration that blatantly ignores the fact that it is exactly those institutions that the recent coup had helped to destroy. Thus it seems that the last word about this year's events in Haiti have yet to be written. On the contrary, Washington's overweening role in the uprising that ousted Aristide, as well as its obvious bias in favor of the Haitian political opposition movements Democratic Convergence and Group 184 (which had long heatedly called for such an ouster) may yet emerge as one of the more shocking examples of U.S. interference in the internal politics of a hemispheric nation over the last half-century.

Rebels With a Shady Past

Questions about the deplorable human rights record of the rebels who helped overthrow Aristide, many of whom have been enthusiastically embraced by the current government as "freedom fighters," have been swept aside as unnecessary "dwelling on the past," and there has been shockingly little investigation of repeated reports of political murders and massacres of mainly pro-Aristide militants and members of his Lavalas party under the aegis of the present U.S.-installed government led by business consultant and Boca Raton resident Latortue. At the same time, it seemed that no representative of the international community, save the CARICOM nations (led by Jamaica) and several African nations led by South Africa, dared to suggest that the transfer of power to a prime minister essentially handpicked

by the U.S. embassy and the State Department is a demonstrably less than democratic process.

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Aristide Cries Foul

Having found permanent asylum in South Africa after brief sojourns in the Central African Republic and Jamaica—a trip that engendered stern criticism from the U.S. and led to the new Haitian government suspending relations with Kingston in a fit of pique—deposed president Aristide continues to assert that U.S. military personnel and embassy officials played an improper, if not overtly coercive, role in his abrupt departure from Haiti in the early hours of February 29. Aristide has claimed that on that morning he expected to be escorted either to the National Palace or to the U.S. Embassy to meet with journalists following discussions with U.S. Ambassador James Foley, who had become notorious for his manipulative tactics towards the Haitian president over the months preceding his ouster. Instead, he was brought to the airport and herded aboard a U.S.-chartered aircraft, allegedly without his knowledge or consent. The plane was presumably reserved by the embassy hours, if not days, before as part of the pre-planning to get Aristide out of the country on the pretext that Washington could not ensure his safety.

Upon arriving at the airport, Aristide found himself surrounded by U.S. soldiers and without his private security force, contracted from an American company, which had been instructed to withdraw by U.S. officials in no uncertain terms. Though the former president admits that he did not physically resist boarding the plane, the destination of which remained unknown to him until he landed in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, he maintains that an overwhelming presence of armed U.S. personnel amounted to a clear effort on the part of the Bush administration to intimidate him into resignation and flight. Aristide continues to assert that he would not have yielded his office without a struggle had it not been for Washington's plenary role in scripting what was to happen in Haiti on an almost hourly basis. Most recently, he has filed lawsuits against unnamed French and U.S. officials for "threats, death threats, abduction and illegal detention."

U.S. Denies Aristide's Charges

The White House, needless to say, has scoffed at these accusations, with an unnamed senior administration official telling the press that "In his letter of resignation, Mr. Aristide noted that his departure was based on a desire to avoid bloodshed in Haiti . . . Continuing false claims about his resignation and departure embolden the armed gangs that Aristide himself armed and unleashed in Haiti." Needless to say, the State Department has not commented on the subsequent statement by the renowned Creole linguist that translated Aristide's statement, suggesting that he did not in fact officially resign, and the question still remains whether the former president's "resignation" was drafted by the U.S. embassy or the State Department or if it was his own words.

It is clear that the administration has attempted to avoid any damaging revelations on its own role in Aristide's demise by engaging in the same campaign of "character assassination" that it has waged

against the domestic critics of its foreign policies. But these diversionary tactics should not be allowed to obscure the explosive nature of Aristide's accusations: namely, that the U.S. government joined with Haiti's richest businessmen in the Group 184 in an alliance to oust the elected government, as well as silently watched several hundred unsavory thugs and former paramilitaries rampage through the Haitian countryside as they headed for Port-au-Prince without attempting in any way to prevent the ouster of the third democratically elected president in Haiti's history.

A few courageous journalists and members of Congress—most notably the members of the Congressional Black Caucus, especially Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA) and Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY), along with Senators Bob Graham and Bill Nelson from Florida—have spoken out in criticism of the administration's Haiti policy and called for a more thorough investigation of the controversial events of February. But like Haile Selassie's scoffed-at plea before the League of Nations in 1936, Aristide's accusations have otherwise received surprisingly little attention. While the hearings held by the Senate Foreign Relations and House International Relations Committees to investigate the administration's role in Aristide's departure provided a valuable opportunity for members of Congress to directly challenge Assistant Secretary of State for Interamerican Affairs, Roger Noriega, for his repeated and venomous endorsements of the violent overthrow of elected leftist governments, first in Venezuela and then in Haiti, these inquiries represent only a first step in hunting down the truth.

There remains a pressing need for a comprehensive and aggressive investigation into U.S. involvement in Haiti over the past four years, modeled after the Iran-contra hearings in the late 1980s, which could call for punitive action against State Department officials, either in Washington or in Port-au-Prince, found to have played an improper role in the forced removal of Aristide from office. Congressional advocates of a less aggressive and more nuanced U.S. policy towards Latin America and especially Haiti—which has suffered under a lengthy stream of U.S.-backed dictators and periodic occupations over the past two hundred years—should step up the volume of their calls for a full accounting of Aristide's alleged kidnapping.

In addition, presumed Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry would do well to return to his earlier sharp criticisms of the Bush administration's Haiti policy (which was followed with a later dismissive attack on Aristide) with a similar call for an investigation, both in his capacity as the presumptive presidential candidate and as a long-standing member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Such a stance could only enhance his efforts to portray himself as an advocate of a more constructive foreign policy than the bumbling and heavy-handed initiatives being implemented by the incumbent administration.

In League with Murderers

While Aristide crosses the globe to his new home in South Africa, his supporters remaining in Haiti—which likely would constitute a majority in any fair election, especially among the poor, both rural and urban—continue to be targets of widespread political murders and arrests at the hands of the erstwhile rebels. Many of the rebels are former members of the Haitian army and the CIA-created paramilitary group FRAPH (Revolutionary Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti) that terrorized Aristide's supporters in the slums in the aftermath of the first coup against him, which then installed a military regime that ruled from 1991 to 1994. Other allegations regarding the victimization of Aristide supporters—including arbitrary arrests and political assassinations in the capital, and the reported imprisonment of some 20 Aristide supporters in a container in Cap-Haitien before they were allegedly dumped in the sea—cannot be confirmed, due to the absence of an independent media, a functioning justice system or international human rights observers in a country now ruled by technocrats gone sour.

It is obvious, however, that the prevention of human rights abuses and the prosecution of their perpetrators is far from being a priority of the current government, a fact made abundantly clear on March 20, when newly installed Prime Minister Latortue made a visit to Gonaives, his home town and

the city where the recent anti-Aristide rebellion began. There, he hailed the rebels (who had earlier been described by Secretary of State Powell as a gang of thugs) as “freedom fighters” and called for a moment of silence for all those who “fell fighting against the dictatorship”—while standing on the stage with two convicted criminals. The first was Jean-Pierre Baptiste, also known as Jean Tatoune, who was freed from prison in a jailbreak last year after being sentenced to a life term for his participation in the 1994 Raboteau massacre, in which a number of Aristide supporters in a Gonaives slum were killed by FRAPH and military thugs.

The second was Louis-Jodel Chamblain, who was convicted in absentia of the 1993 murder of a beloved pro-Aristide businessman and philanthropist, Antoine Izmyer. Izmyer was attending a memorial service in a Port-au-Prince church for his late brother, murdered by the Haitian military for his opposition to the government, when he was dragged out of the church by soldiers and shot execution-style in the street outside the church. Chamblain subsequently went into exile in the neighboring Dominican Republic, from which he returned early this year to help lead the rebellion against the Aristide government.

On April 22, Chamblain turned himself in to the police in Port-au-Prince in an elaborate charade of heroism and sacrifice; before walking to the prison, he stated at a press conference that he was sacrificing himself “so that Haiti can have a chance for the real democracy I have been fighting for,” and he was escorted by the omnipresent Justice Minister Bernard Gousse, who bizarrely called the decision “a good and noble one”—perhaps not the phrase that would immediately spring to mind to describe a convicted murderer who agreed to return to jail. It is virtually impossible to imagine any U.S. parallel to such a script. However, Baptiste, rebel leader Guy Philippe, who fled to the Dominican Republic in 2000 after helping to plan an attack on the National Palace in an attempted coup, and scores of other known human rights violators or convicted criminals remain at large, having been earlier freed by their rebel confederates, who resorted to massive jailbreaks to spring them.

Gousse: Haiti's John Ashcroft

Gousse's deplorable behavior in the case of Chamblain's elaborate self-confession is but one of many attacks on habeas corpus and the rule of law that reveal him to be more of a John Ashcroft-type justice minister than a prudent figure of public rectitude. Gousse has long been known as a nasty far-right ideologue, and his selection to his post as an anti-Aristide gun-slinger by Latortue reflects poorly on the reckless and amateur nature of the prime minister's rule. While he has asserted that, “There is a plan to bring to justice everyone who has broken the law,” there has as yet been no evidence of the existence of any such plan, at least as it regards rebel leaders and other visceral opponents of the Aristide government. On the contrary, he has indicated in other interviews with the international press that his office does not intend to pursue criminal prosecutions against rebel leaders, a rather alarming assertion that he immediately attempted to soften by offering as an afterthought the assurance that all human rights charges lodged by citizens would be investigated. (As a side note, he noted that since no complaints had been filed against Philippe, there could be no criminal charges brought against him.)

Yet despite his sympathetic treatment of known criminals, Gousse is happy to trumpet his personal vendetta against those who were allied with the democratically-elected president of Haiti and his relentless diligence in pursuing charges against the former president on grounds of the latter's alleged embezzlement, corruption and misuse of power. He has asserted more than once that, “It's too early to say that tomorrow I will ask for his extradition, but we will build a case.” Accusations have circulated widely among Haitian governmental officials that the former Aristide government looted Haiti's already meager public treasury. The interim finance minister, prominent Haitian economist Henri Bazin, stated that upon assuming his position, he found less than a month's foreign reserves in the Central Bank and an immediate government deficit of \$100 million. In fact, this figure was more than the U.S.-coddled military junta left in the treasury when it was forced to out by a belated U.S. intervention in 1994. Other officials of the Aristide government have been prevented from leaving the country as the current

administration pursues criminal cases against them, and former interior minister Jocelerme Privert already has been jailed on accusations of corruption and political violence, on the basis of questionable supporting evidence.

Given increasing evidence of serious misconduct and corruption at some levels of the former government, it is essential that investigations of possible criminal actions should be pursued and those responsible prosecuted (though it is important to note that as of yet, the Latortue government has not presented any evidence directly implicating Aristide in any wrongdoing.) At the same time, the blatant partisanship obvious in the skewed version of justice being propounded by Latortue and Gousse, in which already convicted criminals and other figures notorious for past human rights abuses freely walk the streets while the Justice Ministry pours its scarce funds and manpower into investigating supposed crimes of officials of the Aristide administration, adds up to a serious blow to the credibility and ostensible neutrality of the interim government. The officials responsible appear to be more interested in conducting a witch hunt, rather than acting in a deliberate manner.

“Technocracy” a Mask for Partisan Bias

Any reasonably well-informed observer of Haitian affairs must by now have rejected the claim often repeated by U.S. and U.N. officials that the Latortue government is simply an assemblage of nonpartisan technocrats, working to provide competent administration and good governance in this period of transition until new elections are held. According to U.N. Special Envoy Reginald Dumas, whose own bias against Aristide is one of the real scandals of the Haitian intervention, this period is likely to be at least eighteen months. While the appointment of Alix Baptiste, who held an administrative post in the Foreign Ministry under Aristide, as secretary of state for Haitians living abroad, has been noted as an exception to Latortue's nonpartisanship, far less attention has been paid to several other glaring violations of the government's supposed neutrality: Foreign Affairs Minister Yvon Simeon previously had served as the Democratic Convergence representative in Europe and Minister of Justice Bernard Gousse has been described by Radio Metropole as an active member of Group 184. The obviously anti-Aristide affiliations of these key government officials suggest that far from being merely a caretaker government of administrators, the Latortue administration is the dream team of the Haitian opposition parties, endorsed (and virtually hand-picked) by Washington to sweep away all vestiges of the Aristide-ism and turn the country in a more conservative, and decidedly more pro-U.S., direction—even though there is no constitutional sanction whatsoever for this project. Washington has used the expulsion of the Haitian president as an excuse to hijack the country's political system.

Citing these biases and abuses, Lavalas, the party of Aristide now being led by Leslie Voltaire, who served as minister of the diaspora in Aristide's cabinet, has refused to nominate a representative to the panel organizing the new round of elections, raising the possibility that a party retaining the support of at least a significant plurality, if not a majority, of the population, will not soon reenter the political process. Thus far, the blessings of the Bush administration have thus far been sufficient to endow the current government with a certain degree of legitimacy, at least in Washington if not in Port-au-Prince. But the alarming and chaotic human rights situation and the clear partisan bias of Latortue and his key operatives—who appear to have entered into what Jocelyn McCalla, executive director of the New York National Coalition of Haitian Rights, called an “unholy alliance” with the rabidly anti-Aristide gangs that still control most of the country—can be expected to slowly but steadily erode the credibility of this government over time, both at home and abroad.

Humanitarian Conditions Deteriorate

Not only is the legitimacy of Haiti's interim administration highly questionable, it has presided over a significant decline in living standards in this already desperately poor country—a development that offers conclusive proof to those critics that had berated Aristide for his supposed ineffectiveness that Haiti's deep-rooted economic, social and environmental problems are beyond the capacity of any one

by Haiti in the past. The U.S. and its partners seem to be committing once again the mistakes of earlier "nation-building" missions in the 1990s: failing to adequately establish security and fully disarm armed factions, failing to invest significant time into institution-building, and failing to provide the bare minimum of aid which is needed to prop up Haiti's fragile economy.

At the same time, the interim administration's toleration of rampant human rights abuses and the U.N.'s abject failure to identify fully investigate accusations made regarding the fall of the Aristide government can be expected to heighten political instability and increase the chances of renewed violence—though the recent decision by the Organization of American States to launch an investigation into the circumstances of Aristide's removal may help in shedding some light on this enduring and ugly controversy. The result of such neglect is predictable: namely, a new round of political instability and violence, continued deprivation for the Haitian people and prolonged anxiety in the Caribbean about the consequences of state collapse in Haiti. It is time for the U.N., Washington, and Ottawa alike to refocus on Port-au-Prince—or risk confronting a renewed Haitian crisis in the years and decades to come.

This analysis was prepared Jessica Leight, COHA Research Fellow

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