

HAITI NEWS ROUNDUP FEBRUARY 4 -7, 2006

Waiting In Misery

Haitians voting in national elections found mostly peaceful conditions. But can the peace survive the ballot results?

By Malcolm Beith

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Feb. 7, 2006 - Samuel Bien Aimé woke up at 4 a.m. Tuesday morning ready to vote. After trekking 2.5 miles to the nearest polling station in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, and standing patiently in line for nearly six hours, Bien Aimé finally cast his ballot for presidential candidate Rene Preval. "I waited in misery for this," said the smiling 28-year-old as he left the polling station near the capital's Cité Soleil slum.

As a country, Haiti is no stranger to such sentiments. The country's presidential and parliamentary elections have been postponed four times since November, and given the country's long troubled history of governance, the excitement about these elections has been brewing some time. The postponements—due to the lack of organization and coordination of the Provisional Election Council, the Organization of American States and the United Nations—have only led to more expectancy among the population. And, of course, in a country which has endured 33 military coups in its 202 years of independence, there is the anticipation of violence—despite the presence of 9,000 UN peacekeepers.

When the time to vote finally came on Tuesday, the worst fears of widespread bloodshed didn't follow. In the trash-strewn streets of Port-au-Prince, thousands of Haitians waited patiently in crowded winding lines for hours. Certainly, there were frustrations, and a fair amount of somewhat organized chaos. Many polling stations failed to open on time because election workers had failed to show or ballots were missing. There were also scuffles as voters tried to push their way past local policemen and UN troops to enter the stations. It was reported that a policeman and a voter died in an incident in Gonaives, and two elderly gentlemen reportedly died in the capital (one of asphyxiation and one of a heart attack).

But by Haitian standards—during a 1988 election, hundreds of voters were massacred at a polling station—the day went relatively smoothly. "There have been a few incidents which were unpleasant," said UN mission spokesperson David Wilmhurst. "But for the most part, things have gone pretty well."

Whether the election's aftermath will proceed in similar fashion is another question. Thirty-three candidates are on the ballot, and a majority is needed to prevent a run-off on March 19. Former president and populist agronomist Rene Preval, the frontrunner, led the latest pre-election polls with about 40 percent of popular support, and judging from surveys of voters leaving stations across Port-au-Prince, appeared headed towards victory. One such Preval backer, 40-year-old Cocote Malme, spoke confidently. "He brought calm when he was president," she said at a voting station in the Bel Air neighborhood of the capital. "He will give hope to Haiti. He'll protect us."

But this is Haiti, and with a list of candidates that includes Danny Toussaint, an alleged drug smuggler running as a moderate; Charles Henry Baker (the second favorite candidate), a powerful businessman; and former president Leslie Manigat (who was ousted by the military in 1988 and is now running third in the polls), there will likely be complaints about the results. "You don't have an election, you have selection," said 18-year-old Wilmer Philogene at the voting station near Cité Soleil.

And then of course, there is the problem of Cité Soleil itself. A teeming slum on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, it is run by gangs accused of everything from drug smuggling to the recent spate of kidnappings (they reached a reported rate of 8 to 10 a day in December). The one neighborhood in the capital not controlled by UN troops, Cité Soleil was also not granted the privilege of voting booths. As a result, protests in the past weeks have prompted speculation that the slum's estimated 250,000 residents—loyal to Preval because of his previous ties to ousted president Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the Fanmi Lavalas party—might not vote. Although gang leaders called on citizens to turn out for the election, dozens of would-be voters could already be seen walking back to the slum at 9 a.m. Tuesday morning, disappointed by what they claimed was the closure of the nearest polling station.

"They don't want Preval voters here," said Bien Aimé, reiterating a popular Cité Soleil claim that Haiti's business elite and current government would do anything to keep a populist like Preval out of power. Alleged gang leader Amaral Duclona, considered by many to be one of Cité Soleil's most powerful figures and also often referred to as Haiti's "most wanted man" on account of allegations of kidnappings and involvement in drugs (all of which he denies vehemently) told NEWSWEEK that he wouldn't vote. Of course, he has a reason. "I can't vote," he said Monday, "because I'm a wanted man."

Time will tell whether the election can be considered a real success. The results won't be officially announced until Friday, and then there is the possibility of a run-off or worse, violence. But for now, Haiti seems to have pulled off as competent an election as it could, given the circumstances. And perhaps most importantly in a country with so many reasons to doubt the effectiveness of democracy, there was optimism on Tuesday. "All Haitians are waiting for change," said 49-year-old voter Germina Paul. They may have to wait a little longer, but if Tuesday's mood is anything to go by, this election could be a small step in the right direction.

Haitians Jam Polls, Bringing Their Hopes and Hardships

By GINGER THOMPSON

New York Times

Published: February 7, 2006

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, Feb. 7 — After more than a year of planning by the United Nations and an interim government installed by the United States, the long-awaited presidential elections started today with signs of the same tensions and disorder that have kept the poorest country in the Western hemisphere at the brink of chaos.

A crowd demanding to vote in Haiti's national election on Tuesday broke into a polling station operated by United Nations peacekeepers near the seaside slum of Cité Soleil because their assigned station had not opened. In most places in the country, voting was peaceful.

But political observers and election organizers said that just as today's voting brought displays of this country's devastating hardships and its deep political divisions, the half-mile lines of people who had walked hours to cast their ballots also showed an abiding determination and hope for something better.

"I don't want to see life this way, with kids washing cars on the streets instead of going to school," said 21-year-old Toussaint Wisley at a polling place in the working-class area of Bon Repos. "I want to vote so that things can change and life in this country can be respected."

Barrett Kajuste, 49, said he did not mind walking an hour to a polling center in Gonaïves.

"I am here because I want a change in my country," he said. "I have never been employed in my life. That is the change I want."

Tens of thousand of people started out for the polls before dawn to get to polling places that were set to open at 6 a.m. In many places, voters waited for up to five hours, with empty stomachs and in stifling heat, for polls to open. And then they waited hours more to cast their ballots.

At voting centers across Haiti, there were angry people scaling walls, smashing windows and pushing down doors, overtaking police and United Nations soldiers to get inside polls and confront visibly overwhelmed electoral workers.

The most heated tensions flared around the violent slum of Cité Soleil, where supporters of the leading presidential candidate, René Préval, inflamed tensions by shouting that the government was trying to deny people the right to vote and that the elections were a sham.

Mr. Préval, who was previously elected president in 1995, is widely considered to be a protégé of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and heir to his numerous supporters among the poor. Two years ago, an armed uprising ousted Mr. Aristide, who is now living in exile in South Africa.

All told, there are 33 candidates in the presidential race.

At the polls today, pregnant and elderly women collapsed both from exhaustion and from the shoving. Pajeb Hidson, an electoral supervisor in the Delmas section of Port-au-Prince, said one woman had collapsed there this morning and died later at a local hospital.

Some voters abandoned the polls and started protests. Most, expressing their hopefulness, stood firm.

"Even though there is so much disorganization, I want to fulfill my civic duty," said Jean Gérald Luman, who lives in the neighborhood of La Saline, which is adjacent to Cité Soleil. "People need a change. They need jobs. They need food. They need schools.

"But most of all, they need stability," he said. "That is why we are voting."

Martin Landi, director of electoral operations for the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti, acknowledged that the voting had gotten off to a rocky start this morning. But he said the United Nations had expected challenges in this "inflammable environment."

By early this afternoon, Mr. Landy said, more than 90 percent of the 804 polling places were running peacefully. He compared the voting in Haiti to elections he had helped organize in other countries ravaged by violence and political upheaval, including Afghanistan and East Timor. People here, like people there, he said, proved their determination to participate despite hardships and the threat of violence.

"To me, the message that people are sending is that they want to vote," Mr. Landy said. "Some are pushing. And some are fighting. But they are voting."

Electoral supervisors said that among the reasons they were unable to open polls on time was that their workers had no transportation. The supervisors complained that they did not get ballots and other materials on time, and that the voting centers were extremely understaffed to handle the huge numbers of voters who showed up.

In at least a few dozen polling places, electoral authorities acknowledged, poll workers were illiterate and could not find voters names on alphabetical lists, so they had to scan pages of photographs. And illiterate voters could not read signs that explained where to cast their ballots.

There were 45 voting tables at a single bureau in Gonaïves, expected to handle 18,000 voters. Jacques Toussaint stood in line at just about every one of them and thought about giving up and going home.

"We don't have the right to vote," he said, sweaty and scowling. "Everywhere I go I cannot find my name. I have been here since 6 in the morning and I still cannot vote."

Haitians Vote as UN Prepares for `Long' Presence (Update2)

Feb. 7, 2006

Bloomberg News

Haitians are voting for president today in the first election since Jean-Bertrand Aristide was driven from power two years ago, with the prospect that United Nations forces will remain essential to the country no matter who wins.

The Organization of American States, which is monitoring the voting, said in a statement that Haiti's electoral commission would keep the polls open at least two hours beyond the 4 p.m. scheduled close, and possibly up to six extra hours, because of the heavy turnout.

``The elections are a first crucial step, but it will take a number of years and a lot of hard work," Hedi Anabi, UN assistant secretary-general for peacekeeping, told reporters in New York yesterday. He said that while successful presidential and subsequent local elections could lead to a gradual shift in UN personnel from soldiers to civilian police, peacekeepers will remain in Haiti ``for the long haul."

Up to 3.5 million people are choosing among a field of 32 presidential candidates in the election, which has been delayed four times since October. A runoff is set for March 19 in the event that no candidate gets more than 50 percent of the votes. The new government is scheduled to take office on March 29, and local elections are set to be held on April 13.

The UN and OAS said there were no reports of violence directed at voters.

Security Effort

The UN peacekeeping force of 9,034 is deploying across the nation in an effort to ensure a safe election, Anabi said, and some soldiers used mules to deliver ballots to remote areas.

A U.S. Coast Guard cutter and a U.S. Navy frigate moved into waters off Port-au-Prince as a precautionary security measure, according to Richard Grenell, spokesman for the U.S. mission to the UN.

``To those who may feel tempted to disrupt the democratic process, let me say that the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti will do all it can to support the Haitian authorities in ensuring that the vote is held in freedom and safety," UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said before the vote in a message to the Haitian people.

`A Failed State'

Successful elections won't begin to cure Haiti's deep-rooted problems, according to Marco Vicenzino, deputy executive director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London-based group that analyzes political and military conflicts.

``The situation is not ripe for an election," Vicenzino said in an interview. ``The UN is running on a shoestring, and the international community is not investing in the process. The drug trade is

flourishing as a stop-off point between the U.S. and South America, and there is a vast amount of lawlessness and corruption, all the elements of a failed state."

Haiti has depended on UN, U.S. and other foreign troops for security since Aristide left the country during a rebellion in April 2004. Poverty is entrenched. Haiti's national income, around \$1 a day per person, is about a 10th of what is generated throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Day After

Vicenzino is concerned that the outcome won't be widely accepted, especially if Aristide supporters in Cite Soleil believe their views aren't reflected in the result. Cite Soleil is a slum in Port-au-Prince where up to 500,000 people live.

"You can have all the mechanics right, and have no violence, but that is not going to change anything," he said. "It's what happens the day after, whether there is some sort of national consensus that is critical, and that is very difficult to foresee because the country is so fragmented and polarized."

Polls indicate that Rene Preval, who was briefly prime minister in Aristide's first administration, in 1991, is the front runner with about 35 percent support. Preval, 63, has the strong support of the Port-au-Prince slums because of his association with Aristide.

Cite Soleil

Anabi said the country is far more secure today, with the principal threat from armed gangs that control Cite Soleil. No voting centers were located in Cite Soleil, and only 60,000 inhabitants registered to vote at nearby stations, Haiti's ambassador to the U.S., Raymond Joseph, said.

Two Jordanian soldiers with the UN died on Jan. 17 when they were shot near Cite Soleil. The risk of violence was too high to place voting stations there, according to Anabi.

Haitian officials closed schools and banned the sale of alcohol in a bid to enhance security. American Airlines spokeswoman Martha Pantin said flights to Port-au-Prince were suspended yesterday and today because of a history of people having trouble getting to and from the capital's airport on election days.

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Haitians defy fears, chaos in vote for democracy

Tue Feb 7, 2006

Reuters

By Jim Loney and Joseph Guyler Delva

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (Reuters) - Haitians put aside fears of violence and voted by candlelight into the night on Tuesday in the first presidential election since Jean-Bertrand Aristide was toppled two years ago.

Three people died, including a policeman lynched by a mob, and voting began more than three hours late in many areas, infuriating poor supporters of ex-president Rene Preval, a one-time Aristide ally favored to win.

But with U.N. peacekeepers keeping watch, polling stations stayed open several hours after the official 4 p.m. EST closing time so everyone still in line could vote.

Where there was no electricity, they cast their ballots under candlelight in the poorest country in the Americas -- once the richest jewel in France's colonial crown.

Official results may not be known for days and the rocky start marred an election that could prove troublesome for U.S. policy in the impoverished nation of 8.5 million people.

Critics accused Aristide of despotism and Washington pressed him to leave for exile during a bloody rebellion that drove him from power in 2004 only to find his one-time ally Preval now expected by many to retake the presidency.

The U.S. government said Haiti's election appeared "pretty successful" and pledged to work with whoever is elected.

"Far from looking backward we're going to be looking forward," Tom Shannon, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, told Reuters.

Some Preval supporters alleged the government planned the delays to limit the vote in poor areas and hurt his chances.

"It's a fraud. If we can't vote, Preval won't be elected," said Ysail Joseph, a 75-year-old man who got up at 4 a.m. to walk from the Cite Soleil slum to his polling station but was still there waiting to vote several hours later.

"ALMOST A MIRACLE"

Voting was easier in the afternoon, however, and observers said violence was less than many had feared.

"It is almost a miracle, fortunately, that this was a day, apart from some incidents, almost without violence. That is extremely important for a country like Haiti," said Johan Van Hecke, the head of a European Union observer mission.

The United Nations said a police officer killed a citizen near a voting station in the northern town of Gros-Morne, and was then lynched by people who saw the incident. An old man died in a crush of voters in the capital.

Thousands of people in Cite Soleil rose before dawn and marched in large groups past rooting pigs, smoking garbage and U.N. armored personnel carriers to vote.

Exactly 20 years after the dictatorial rule of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier crumbled, Tuesday's vote offered hope for an end to the instability that has crippled Haiti since then.

Preval draws support from the dire slums where Aristide was strongest. He was president from 1996 to 2001, an era of calm between Aristide's two terms, and is Haiti's only elected leader to complete his term and hand over power peacefully.

But he is opposed by the same wealthy elite that helped drive Aristide from power.

Preval, who held a comfortable lead in opinion polls, needs more than 50 percent of the votes to avoid a run-off.

His main rivals are businessman Charles Baker and Leslie Manigat, who was president for a few months in 1988 before being deposed in a military coup. There are 33 presidential candidates. Voters were also electing senators and parliamentarians.

Pro-Aristide gang leaders blamed for a wave of kidnappings over the last year recently changed tack by backing the poll, and the level of violence has since dropped dramatically.

Still, experts warn Preval's supporters could turn violent if he loses or if they suspect fraud, and that anti-Aristide groups might be intent on keeping Preval out of power.

There was no doubting ordinary Haitians' commitment. At a Port-au-Prince school where thugs killed voters with guns and machetes in 1987, halting one of Haiti's first attempts at democratic elections, Molene Zephyr overcame her fear to vote.

"I was in the line when they came to shoot here in 1987. I ran and hid myself behind a wall and many other people did the same. I was afraid to come here today because of what happened. But I came because I want to see change in the country."

(Additional reporting by Tom Brown in Miami)

Massive turnout from Haitian voters

BY JOE MOZINGO, JACQUELINE CHARLES AND TRENTON DANIEL

PORT-AU-PRINCE

Miami Herald

Feb. 7, 2006

They set out from their slum before dawn, shadows walking through smoky darkness and arriving by the thousands to vote Tuesday for a new president who might deliver them from the bloodshed and hunger that is Haiti.

By 7 a.m. some 5,000 stood in line outside the polling center at a motor vehicles bureau, knowing it would take hours but determined to vote in the first election since President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was toppled two years ago.

While the balloting was marred early on by bureaucratic problems, the massive turnout from the slums - who consider the populist Aristide a savior - was a dramatic glimpse of how Haitians in recent weeks came to embrace a four-times postponed election they once doubted could bring any change.

"We need peace, so we can rest finally," said Manele Joseph, 55, who recently took refuge in a church because of the fighting around her home in the slum of Cité Soleil, where violence between gangs and U.N. peacekeepers has been so severe that a polling center could not be safely put there.

A quiet woman with sad, hooded eyes, she put on her church dress and a string of purple beads and began the one-mile trek from Cité Soleil to the motor vehicle bureau just after 3 A.M., joining some of the 60,000 registered voters in the slum who walked to the polls. Most mass transport stayed home amid confusion over whether they would be allowed to circulate.

Fears that armed anti-Aristide groups would attack polling places to derail the election - the frontrunning candidate, René Préval, is a former president viewed by his conservative critics as an Aristide proxy - proved unwarranted. Four deaths were reported, though it was not clear whether they were directly related to the elections.

'But in the poorest country in the hemisphere, a country with a long history of election violence and now candidate for the world's list of failed states, the balloting for a president, 30 senators and 99 members of the lower chamber turned out to be notably peaceful.

The high turnout so early, with most voters showing up right around dawn, caught electoral workers off-guard. Many were unprepared and could not open the polling centers on time, creating tension at many times, pandemonium at others.

At several polling places around the capital, voters stormed past some of the U.N. peacekeepers and Haitian police guarding the sites. But by the afternoon, most polling places appeared calm and voters were slowly moving along.

"Many voters came very early, and some of the centers, particularly the big ones, were overwhelmed," said Mark Schneider, a senior vice president of the International Crisis Group, here to observe the elections. "But the patience of the Haitian people is formidable. And the will of the people to vote is truly impressive."

Jean-Gilles Anite, 25, waited in line for 4 ½ hours in the lower-class Bel Air neighborhood to vote for Préval.

"It was no problem," she said. "We need this country to change. But it's not only the new president that has to change things. The Haitian people have to change, to put our heads together and unite." Haitian officials, foreign diplomats and international observers held their breath during the chaos of the morning, but began to praise the process by the afternoon.

"A stunning example of success for the Haitian people," said Tim Carney, the Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Haiti. "They came out early, they braved the ragged initial disorganization and insisted on voting, and did."

Leslie Voltaire, a moderate member of Aristide's Lavalas Family party, called it "a beautiful day." "It began as a catastrophe but it is ending well and I think there was a massive turnout," he said. "This was the first time Haitians were on time -- before the time. But the state was not ready for them." The turnout among the 3.5 million registered voters who cast ballots had not been determined by

Tuesday evening because some of the polls that opened late were staying open past the scheduled 4 pm closing and still had voters waiting in line.

Once the votes are counted, the tally sheets will be sent to a tabulation center in Port-au-Prince. Because many polling centers are isolated - 180 can only be reached by mule - final results are not expected at least for two days.

But reports from around the nation of 8.1 million indicate turn-out was high everywhere, including Gonaives -- a port city in the north that spawned the revolt against Aristide, a former priest now living in exile in South Africa.

Aristide sparked hope among the poor when he won Haiti's first truly democratic elections in 1990. A military coup toppled him in 1991, some 20,000 U.S. troops returned him to power in 1994 and he was elected in 2000 to a second term - during which he armed slum gangs to protect his government.

"The election means we get to liberate the foreigners from our country," said Gonaives resident Jiordany Esteril, 26, referring to the 9,000 U.N. Blue Helmets deployed in Haiti since Aristide's last ouster. "This will help Haitians find a solution."

Bureaucratic foulups also caused frustration in Gonaives, mostly about voters' names that could not be found on registration lists.

"I'm a citizen, but I can't vote because they can't find my name," Rony Auderuste, 29, said at a Gonaives poll after waiting seven hours. "I'm going home because they couldn't find my name."

In Port-au-Prince, many of the voters had the same complaint, with some saying that they had to walk to two polling centers before they found the correct one.

Serge Gilles, an also-running presidential candidate for the social democratic group Fusion, blamed the foulups on the Haitian electoral council and advisors from the United Nations and the Organization of American States.

"When I think of what I went through here today, as a presidential candidate, what will the Haitian people have to do to be able to vote?" he said shortly after a police escort allowed him to negotiate the chaotic mass of people waiting to vote in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Petionville.

At the motor vehicle bureau, the first person in line was Marie-Ange Francois, a 20-year-old who is nine-months pregnant and had to walk one mile to get there -- and then wait in line for hours. "I came with her in case the baby breaks on the way," said her mother, Marie Joseph.

A little way back in line was Lucien Louis, a wiry 71-year-old Cité Soleil resident who shook violently like someone who suffers from Parkinsons disease. He walked with uncontrolled energy and relied on neighbors to keep from falling into the slum's open sewers.

But he wasn't going to miss the election no matter how difficult the trek.

"We can't eat, we can't sleep, there are bullets all over the place ... I feel like I'm in the middle of a war," he said. ``This has to change."

For the Miami Herald's coverage of the Haiti electoral process go to Miamiherald.com and click on the Americas section.

In Haiti, 'the least imperfect elections'

They've been promised a free, fair vote, but uncertainty and fear of violence linger

MARINA JIMÉNEZ

Globe and Mail, Canada

Feb. 7, 2006

PORT-AU-PRINCE — A long line of frustrated Haitians waited for hours in the heat yesterday -- uncertain where or even if they would be able to vote. Without registration cards, they can't take part in choosing a president in today's long-overdue elections -- the first since Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in a bloody rebellion two years ago.

"I applied a long time ago, but I still don't have my voter registration card. This is my third time coming here," said Mona Jean Louis, 29, as she and hundreds of others waited outside the Provisional Electoral Council's headquarters on a dusty, traffic-clogged street in the city. "I have a baby at home, and I cannot wait all day."

Despite assurances that the election will be free, fair and secure, there is fear of chaos and even violence today. More than 10 per cent of the 3.5 million Haitians who registered to vote might not be issued their cards in time; many voters do not know where to vote, while others must walk up to eight kilometres to one of 807 voting centres located across the mountainous country.

Haiti's electoral council rejects the idea that fraud could taint results, and says that some Haitians were late in picking up their voter cards. The election will be the best-run in Haiti's history and will help restore the state's legitimacy, laying the foundation for a return of foreign investment and aid, according to the council.

"Haiti's destiny is in your hands. All precautions for integrity and reliability have been taken," said Jacques Bernard, the council's director. "Good elections are the only solution to saving our nation."

More than 10,000 United Nations soldiers, as well as 5,000 Haitian police, have been dispatched to the countryside and around the capital, which has been besieged by a rash of kidnappings. An interim government has ruled since Mr. Aristide went into exile on Feb. 29, 2004, after former soldiers and armed thugs led an uprising and demanded his resignation, amidst accusations that the former Roman Catholic priest had armed the gangs in the slums. Mr. Aristide's second term in government was also undermined by allegations of irregularities in the 2000 Senate election.

René Préval, a 63-year-old agronomist and former protégé of the exiled Mr. Aristide, is the presidential front-runner, with the most recent Gallup poll showing he has 37 per cent of support. As Haiti's president from 1996-2001, between Mr. Aristide's two terms, he was the only elected leader to serve his full term and hand over office peacefully.

His closest rival is Charles Baker, a 50-year-old, wealthy industrialist from the elite.

If no candidate receives 50 per cent plus one of the votes, a run-off will be held March 19 between the two leading candidates.

"These will be the least imperfect elections Haiti could think about having," said Mark Schneider, with the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based non-governmental organization. "Given the problems in Haiti as a failed state, holding elections is the right thing to do to avoid further violence."

Haitians remember all too well the disastrous November, 1987, election when thugs with guns and machetes killed 34 voters at a school in the capital. Still, after weeks of gun battles inside squalid, densely populated slums here, the streets were quiet yesterday.

Initially slated for October, 2005, the election, which has cost \$73-million (U.S.) to organize, has been delayed four times in four months. Officials with the United Nations and the Organization of American States have overseen planning, with ballots supplied by the Dominican Republic, ballot boxes from Mexico, and voting booths, pens and indelible ink from Canada. More than 280 mules helped carry election materials to remote rural areas and will transport ballot boxes to central electoral stations after polls close today.

Officials expect to announce results within three days.

Nearly 300 international observers -- including 160 Canadians -- are monitoring the election. This is the first time in Haitian history that voters have been issued national identity documents -- laminated voter cards, with a photograph and fingerprints.

In a country in which half of the adults are illiterate, candidates have relied heavily on radio jingles to campaign. Posters decorate the corrugated fences of the main cities, and election graffiti are scrawled on the walls of slums. Yesterday, dozens of students stood near a fence outside the elegant whitewashed Presidential Palace, studying posters of the presidential contenders.

Many poor voters in shantytowns such as Cité Soleil and Bel Air are supporting Mr. Préval.

"A vote for Préval is a vote for Aristide," said Jean Oudey Neuma, a 44-year-old shoe repairman in Bel Air. "Aristide is the one who helped us and gave us everything. And Mr. Préval will bring him back."

Mr. Préval has said Mr. Aristide is welcome to return, although his presence in the country is certain to have a destabilizing effect.

Mr. Préval's campaign symbol is three leaves, and his slogan refers to the creole saying that with three leaves or roots, all problems can be solved.

Mr. Baker's symbol is a colourfully decorated Haitian bus with the creole slogan "There is room for everybody." He has used his official candidacy number, 44, in campaign songs, taking advantage of the fact that in Haiti four-by-fours, which are needed to traverse the potholed roads, are a symbol of power. Mr. Baker has also distributed packets of M&Ms with the number 44 on them.

Among the others running for president are Guy Philippe, a 37-year-old former police chief who led the anti-Aristide rebellion; Leslie Manigat, a 75-year-old ex-president who spent two decades in exile; and Dany Toussaint, a chief of police under the Aristide government and suspected in the United States for drug trafficking and for the unsolved slaying of a journalist in 2000.

Haiti, the world's first independent black republic, is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with 55 per cent of the 8.5 million inhabitants living on less than \$2 a day.

The electoral process

Haitians go to the polls today to choose a president and a 129-member parliament, including the 30-member Senate and the 99-member Chamber of Deputies. This is how the electoral system works:

Under the two-round system, if candidates earn less than 50 per cent of the vote plus one, the two front-runners face each other in a runoff, to be held March 19.

The president is elected to a five-year term. Parliament stopped functioning in January of 2004 when it was dissolved. Since then the president has been ruling by decree.

Deputies are elected for four years in single-seat constituencies.

About 86 per cent of those eligible were registered to vote.

Senators are elected for six years.

Voters are marked with indelible ink to stop them from casting ballots twice.

Ballots include candidates' names, as well as photographs and symbols of the parties as almost half the population is illiterate.

Election Day and Beyond

by Brian Concannon

ZNet

February 07, 2006

If Haiti's much awaited (and four times postponed) elections take place on February 7, many questions will be answered: are the reduced number of voting centers sufficient, as the government promises? Did the troubled process of registering voters and distributing cards, which caused most of the delays, finally work? And of course, the big question: can the Haitian police and the UN Peacekeepers protect voters against those who will use violence to derail the process?

February 7 will close the book on other questions that will never be answered. We will never know how much a third consecutive peaceful and punctual transfer of power from an elected President to an elected successor would have consolidated Haiti's fragile democracy. President Jean-Bertrand Aristide made the first such transfer in Haiti's history in 1996, President Rene Preval the second one in 2001. The Constitution sets the third transfer for this February 7, but on that day the current elected President, President Aristide, will be in exile in South Africa, thousands of miles away, and his successor will not have been picked. We will never know how all the prominent politicians confined unjustly to jail, like former Senate President and Prime Minister Yvon Neptune- one of the top vote getters in the May 2000 legislative elections- would have done had they run in the elections. We will never know how many votes the Lavalas party- which has won every election since the end of the Duvalier regime in 1986, by a landslide- would have won this time. Lavalas announced eighteen months ago that it would participate in elections when the repression against it stopped, but the interim government has not been willing to make that concession.

But the biggest question of all will not be answered on February 7 or in Haiti at all: whether the international community will accept the Haitian voters' choice this time. Haiti's last elections, in November 2000, were held in relative security, with broad public participation and a clear popular choice. But the U.S., France, Canada and other countries disagreed with that choice, so they undermined the elected government with three years of political and economic coercion, and eventually bundled the President onto a U.S. plane headed for the Central African Republic.

Haiti's Caribbean neighbors, the CARICOM countries, know that the answer to this question is vital to Haiti's democracy, as well as to their own. They understand that as long as wealthy countries retain their veto power over Haitian elections, and elite minorities can appeal their losses to Washington, that Haiti will never develop a sustainable, peaceful democracy.

The CARICOM countries also know that instability in Haiti endangers their own stability, and not only because of the refugees generated by each successive coup d'etat. If the powerful countries can get away with brazenly kidnapping Haiti's president, they can cause similar disruption elsewhere in the neighborhood, especially as Caribbean governments spend an increasing share of their budgets on foreign debt service.

So CARICOM has been asking questions about the international community's commitment to democracy in Haiti for two years now. They requested the Organization of American States (OAS) to investigate the circumstances of the February 2004 coup d'etat, hoping that shining light on that coup

d'état would prevent a recurrence in Haiti, or in their own countries. Although CARICOM countries have almost half the votes in the OAS, they do not pay half the expenses, so the organization ignored their request. The Africa Union, which together with CARICOM has a third of the seats in the United Nations, asked that body to investigate, with similar results.

Although many powerful countries would like to see this question go away, it is too central to everything that is happening right now in Haiti to sweep under the rug. If the elections go well on February 7, it will be because hundreds of election workers toiled long hours at great risk and with little pay to make it so. If there is high participation, it will be because millions of voters walked a long way to wait patiently in long lines in the hot sun to exercise their right to vote. But all this sacrifice will be an empty exercise if foreign powers and a minority in Haiti once again veto the results.

The New York Times raised the question about U.S. tolerance for Haitian voters' decisions on January 29, with a long story titled "Democracy Undone." The article documented the Bush Administration's systematic implementation of unconstitutional regime change, even against the objections of its own ambassador to Haiti. Four human rights groups- Yale Law School's Human Rights Clinic, TransAfrica Forum, the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux and the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti- raised the question again on February 2, in a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the human rights arm of the OAS. The petition was filed on behalf of Haitian citizens whose democratic rights were violated by the overthrow of their democracy. The petition demonstrates that the OAS' own conventions- especially the Inter-American Democratic Charter- guarantee Haitian citizens the right to vote and to participate in government. It shows how those rights were violated by the overthrow of Haitian democracy and its replacement with an unelected, unconstitutional regime run by Prime Minister flowin in from Boca Raton, Florida.

The Inter-American Commission petition also notes that the OAS conventions prescribe consequences when those rights are violated. It notes that the OAS has not, in fact, implemented the prescribed consequences, and it challenges the Inter-American Commission to take democratic rights seriously by conducting an investigation.

The petitioners know their lawsuit will not bring their elected government back, or compensate Haitians for the two years of violence and repression that the coup d'état unleashed. Just as the poor of Port-au-Prince who will brave gunfire to vote on Tuesday, and the peasants who leave fields in need of tending for the hours' long hike to the voting centers understand that they are making limited choices, making the best out of an extremely flawed election. But they believe in the principles of democracy that the world's powerful institutions, like the OAS, the UN and the U.S. government so frequently preach, so they keep trying.

If past is any guide, Haitian voters will do what they can on Tuesday. They will collectively make a Herculean effort to vote, and will persist against all obstacles except massive deadly violence. And their choice will, once again, be clear: one candidate will win, as usual, by a large margin, while the remaining 31 candidates split a fraction of the votes. And more importantly, behind the clear choice of leadership will be an unequivocal mandate to fundamentally change the horrible social and economic conditions that have plagued Haiti's poor for centuries.

If the past is any guide, the powerful institutions will immediately try to limit the implementation of this mandate, through sanctions, embargos and other coercive measures that are explicitly prohibited by international law. If necessary, they will physically remove non-compliant elected officials.

Haitian voters' persistence in choosing their own leaders, and the wealthy countries' persistence in undermining that choice, challenges the rest of us- we who believe in democracy and can participate in government without walking for hours, dodging bullets or risking political prison. We are challenged to decide whether we believe in democracy enough to speak out when our tax dollars and political power are used to veto the Haitian voters' choices.

Brian Concannon Jr. directs the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti (IJDH), <http://www.ijdh.org>, and was an OAS election observer for several elections in Haiti in 1995.

Op-Ed Contributor
Haiti's Orphan Democracy
By AMY WILENTZ
New York Times
Published: February 7, 2006
Los Angeles

TWENTY years ago today, in the elegant but down-at-the-heels central square of Port-au-Prince, the Haitian people celebrated the departure of a dictator and the end of nearly three decades of a nightmare dynasty. In the smallest hours of Feb. 7, 1986, Jean-Claude Duvalier, his chain-smoking wife at his side, drove his Mercedes sedan right up to the open door of a United States Air Force jet and fled the country for the South of France. Along with about 50 members of the foreign press corps, I was there at François Duvalier International Airport, named for the fleeing man's father, who had visited disaster after disaster on his native land.

Now it was morning, and it seemed all of Haiti had descended into the square, each person waving fanlike branches cut from street-side trees. It was as if a forest had come to town to cover up the traces of the hated regime.

A brighter day was dawning, so most people thought, and so I thought, although it was clear that there would be difficult moments ahead. Mobs surged through the city and countryside, hunting down supporters of the ancien régime. Yet Haitians in general were ecstatic. Surely democracy, with that joyous popular will behind it, would triumph.

Soon after that brilliant day, I became acquainted with a bunch of boys. They were young and homeless, and every day dozens of them would gather at the school where Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Catholic priest known for his broadside sermons against the Duvalier regime, lived and worked. The boys spent a lot of time kicking a dead ball around the dusty courtyard in noisy games of soccer. Waldeck was one, another was nicknamed Ayiti (which means Haiti in Creole), another was Ti Johnny. One I did not know so well was Wilmer. There were so many; they all wanted money, and sneakers.

Democracy, it turned out, was not within easy grasp. Having suffered through almost 30 years of the Duvaliers' kleptocracy, Haiti had no economy to speak of, hardly any infrastructure, no workable education system and no viable democratic institutions. The little boys were typical. Under Father Aristide's auspices, they eked out a living at the edge of this dysfunctional non-system, sleeping at night in a shantytown warehouse, with a single light bulb, and straw mats for beds.

In the wake of Mr. Duvalier's ouster, democratic steps were taken: an electoral council established, a Constitution written, candidates announced. In 1990, Haiti held a free and fair election under international supervision, and — to my amazement — my boys' Father Aristide, the priest who spoke for Haiti's disenfranchised millions, became the country's first honestly elected president.

But beneath the veneer of progress, Haiti hadn't really changed. The same ruinous division continued between the tiny upper class, which had long run the country, and the poor. The rich went on living in mansions amid boutiques and restaurants at the literal top of the hill in Port-au-Prince, and the

impoverished, unemployed, illiterate and starving majority of the people endured in the mud, sewage, garbage and pig slop in shantytowns at the bottom, or in the remote countryside, unelectrified and dark. Worse yet, the country was essentially bankrupt, relying almost entirely on funds from donor nations and on money sent back to relatives by Haitians abroad.

President Aristide had little effect on all this, for all his orphan boys and his dedication to popular empowerment. Many of his immediate projects revolved around himself, though he always bore the people's future in mind. As far as he was concerned, he was the people, and the people were President Aristide. Thus a new house for him, with an echoing living room, was a new sanctuary where the people could come to hear his message. A new swimming pool in his yard was a place where the little boys could come to swim without fear or embarrassment — and they did. Meanwhile, conditions in the shantytowns worsened.

None of this was surprising in a Haitian president. But Jean-Bertrand Aristide was supposed to be different. And he really was different. No matter how big his house, how nice his swimming pool, he never lost the respect of a wide swath of the population for whom he remained a commanding symbol of liberation. A powerful sector of Haiti's elite could not stomach that — nor did they like this outsider's control over the country's purse strings.

Once in power, President Aristide was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. If he didn't make slum dwellers and heads of popular movements his closest advisers, for example, he would be shunning the Haitian people, the very ones who gave him his legitimacy. But if he did accept the common people into his circle or reject his handful of upper-class advisers, he would be seen as encouraging naïve, unlettered toughs who were likely to be sycophantic and turn to violence when thwarted.

Haitian society was so polarized between haves and have-nots that every decision was potentially destructive and only moderation might have saved the day. Yet President Aristide was not a natural moderate, and neither were his most implacable enemies — members of a powerful elite that wielded remarkable influence in Washington.

And so President Aristide was overthrown before he had served a year of his term. Reinstated by President Bill Clinton in 1994, Mr. Aristide rightly feared that the same forces — a cabal of elite families, members of the military and American powerbrokers — would conspire to take him down again. He disbanded the army. In 2000, he was again elected president. This time he made stabs at moderation, but his enemies would not budge, and in the end, he believed he needed the militant support of his power base in the shantytowns to stave off another attempt to oust him.

Those boys whom I'd met in 1986 were big now — those who had survived. Waldeck had a baby and was helping with security at the presidential palace. Ti Johnny had been shot and killed in a drug-related incident. Ayiti had died, too — of AIDS, it was said. I didn't hear anything about Wilmer for a long time.

As he had feared, President Aristide was overthrown again in February 2004, with the support of the right-wing elite and a nod from Washington. Soon after, Wilmer surfaced as an armed street organizer in the giant slum of Cité Soleil, on the outskirts of the capital. A skinny boy not so long ago, he had

become a legendary outlaw Aristide supporter known as Dread Wilmer — to some a bandit hero, a Haitian Robin Hood, to others a drug trafficker, gangster and killer. With President Aristide gone, he was vulnerable. Last July, Wilmer and four others, including a woman and her two small children, were killed in a gun battle with the United Nations forces that had been sent to keep the peace in Haiti.

Since Mr. Aristide's most recent ouster, things have fallen apart in Haiti in a dramatic way, with kidnappings and street shootouts commonplace. This is not a propitious atmosphere for today's planned presidential vote, in which René Préval, a former elected president and a former close Aristide associate, is the front-runner, according to polls. If Mr. Préval wins by a wide margin (less likely since electoral authorities decided not to allow voting inside the restive Cité Soleil), he might be able to take some small steps forward for the country.

President Aristide's example, however flawed, makes it hard for any future Haitian leader to rule without a popular mandate. The trouble lies in getting both Haitian elites and American policy makers to accept fair elections and whatever leadership, unpredictable as it might be, that emerges from them. This may not happen today, or even tomorrow. But the new generation of Haiti's elite needs to recognize that regime change in Haiti must come from the electorate. And in the same spirit, Washington — for so long insincere on the question of Haitian democracy — has to put its backing once and for all truly behind the Haitian people.

Amy Wilentz, who is writing a book about California, is the author of "The Rainy Season: Haiti Since Duvalier."

Haiti votes for democracy under shadow of violence

Tue Feb 7, 2006

By Kieran Murray

Reuters

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti- Haitians vote for a president and a new chance at democracy on Tuesday although many fear rival armed gangs could wreck the election.

Exactly 20 years after the dictatorial rule of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier crumbled, Tuesday's vote offers some hope for an end to the coups and instability that have crippled Haiti since then.

In the most recent uprising, former allies and long-time enemies forced former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide to flee two years ago.

A new round of fighting, however, could plunge the poorest country in the Americas into even deeper chaos.

"People are exhausted by this instability, the lack of security," Gerard Le Chevallier, the top U.N. official overseeing the election, told Reuters on Monday.

Front runner Rene Preval draws support from the miserable urban slums and rural areas where his mentor Aristide was strongest.

Preval was also president from 1996 to 2001, an era of relative calm, and he is Haiti's only elected leader to end his term and hand over power peacefully.

"He gave us roads, hospitals, schools. ... He brought us work and there was peace," said Marie Claude, a 41-year-old mother of seven selling grains at a market stall in the Cite Soleil shantytown of the capital.

Preval has a comfortable lead in opinion polls but needs to win at least 50 percent of the votes to avoid a run-off next month. Officials say it will take three days to count the ballots.

Preval's main rivals are Charles Baker, a successful industrialist, and Leslie Manigat, who was president for four months in 1988 before being overthrown in a military coup. There are 33 presidential candidates, but most stand no chance.

U.N. forces used trucks and even mules to ferry ballot papers to voting stations around the country on Monday.

Serious logistic problems forced several postponements and, on the eve of voting, officials warned people in TV ads that some polling stations had been moved.

Many Haitians suspect the unelected interim government has tried to make voting as difficult as possible in poor areas to hurt Preval. Some say they were not told where to cast their ballots and others will have to walk several miles.

U.S. ANTAGONISM

A Preval victory could upset Haiti's business elite and the U.S. government, which in 2004 dropped its earlier support of Aristide and pushed him to step aside.

Security fears forced authorities to postpone the election several times but pro-Aristide gang leaders recently changed tack by backing the elections and telling people to get out and vote.

With that, the level of violence and crime has dropped dramatically in recent days.

Still, experts say Haiti is awash with weapons and that Preval's supporters could turn violent if he loses or if they suspect fraud. On the other side, anti-Aristide armed groups could try to disrupt the election to keep Preval out of power.

Older Haitians remember an election day massacre in 1987, when thugs allegedly linked to the army murdered more than 30 people and authorities quickly scrapped what was supposed to be the first democratic vote after Duvalier's fall.

About 9,000 U.N. peacekeepers are in Haiti and some will stand guard at polling stations in dangerous neighbourhoods on Tuesday to prevent a repeat attack on voters.

Vote Time Extended in Haiti Election
Tuesday February 7, 2006 6:46 PM
By MICHAEL NORTON
Associated Press Writer
The Guardian Unlimited, UK

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) - Polling stations opened late - or not at all - and scuffles broke out Tuesday as Haitians cast ballots in the first presidential election since a bloody revolt two years ago pushed this bloodied, impoverished nation toward total collapse.

Although polls were scheduled to open at 6 a.m. EST, some did not open until hours later. Because of the organizational problems, voting hours originally set to end at 4 p.m. EST were extended by at least two hours, Rosemond Pradel, the secretary-general of Haiti's nine-member Electoral Council, told The Associated Press.

He did not give a new closing time but said there were no plans to extend voting hours into Wednesday.

A shortage of workers, missing ballots and other problems delayed the opening of some voting stations, including those used by people from Cite Soleil, a volatile shantytown at the northern edge of the capital, Port-au-Prince.

Overall, however, voters formed orderly lines and patiently waited to cast ballots.

``There's some frustration and anger on the voting lines," said David Wimhurst, spokesman for the United Nations, which has 9,000 troops and police trying to maintain order in the troubled nation.

``People have been waiting several hours now and in some cases they haven't even got inside."

More than 5,000 people waited to vote at a polling station near Cite Soleil, which was deemed too dangerous to have voting booths of its own. Some frustrated people chanted ``We have the right to vote!" as election workers assembled ballot boxes.

The polling station eventually opened three hours behind schedule. By 11 a.m. local time, people were voting at another station near Cite Soleil but the remaining two had not opened, Wimhurst said.

Earlier, gunshots could be heard from within the slum, which is home to some 200,000 people, but the source of the shooting could not be determined.

The election front-runner is former president Rene Preval, a 63-year-old agronomist who led the country in 1996-2001. He was expected to win support from many poor Haitians, including residents of Cite Soleil and backers of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The other top contenders among the 33 candidates are businessman Charles Henri Baker, 50, whose family runs factories in the assembly-for-export industry, and Leslie Manigat, 75, who was president for five months in 1988 until the army ousted him when he tried to shake up its high command.

The field also includes a former rebel in the insurgency that forced Aristide from office in February 2004 and a former army officer accused in the death of a Haitian journalist.

If no candidate wins a majority, the top two finishers would compete in a March 19 runoff. Hundreds of candidates also are running for 129 parliamentary seats.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said the 9,300-member peacekeeping force "will do all it can to support the Haitian authorities in ensuring that the vote is held in freedom and safety."

Wimhurst blamed Tuesday's problems on poor planning and a lack of trained workers. The Haitian Electoral Council and the Organization of American States were chiefly responsible for organizing the elections, which had been postponed four times.

"Some polling workers didn't show up for work, so we're going to grab people from the crowd, give them some quick training and get them in there," Wimhurst said.

Preval voted at a school in his hometown of Marmelade, in the country's rural north, to cheers from a crowd. In an interview with the AP, he said a large turnout would "mean people are investing everything in this election" and promised to make restoring security to the capital of Port-au-Prince a priority if elected.

"We are a poor country and we will not be able to do everything right away," he said. "But we are determined to do our best and raise the standard of living for the people of Haiti."

The nation is the poorest in the Western Hemisphere.

There were no reports of violence, but a 76-year-old man collapsed and died while trying to vote at a school in the upscale Petionville area of the capital.

Stephane Lacroix, a spokesman for Haiti's electoral council, apologized for the delays and urged voters to be patient, saying authorities were "in control of the situation."

In many areas, voting went smoothly. Clutching newly minted voter ID cards, about 1,000 people lined up before dawn at a polling station in the Port-au-Prince area of Delmas, slowly filing in and leaving with a dark ink stain on their thumbs - proof that they voted.

Outside a polling station in the downtown slum of Bel-Air, hundreds of waiting voters snaked along rutted, trash-strewn streets.

"Haitians are mobilized for change. That's why there's so many people in the street this morning," said Jean Joseph, 44, as he went to cast his ballot.

U.N. special envoy Juan Gabriel Valdes said he was happy to see long lines of voters during a tour of a polling station near St. Pierre church.

``It's a victory for democracy, a victory for Haiti," Valdes said.

Minutes later, impatient voters began shouting, pushing and shoving to keep their position in line. Several fainted and were carried out.

Authorities urged Haitians to vote in large numbers under the protection of the U.N. peacekeepers, calling Tuesday's election a key step to reversing Haiti's cycle of despair.

``Haiti's future depends on this vote," said Jacques Bernard, director general of the electoral council. ``Good elections are the only solution to saving our nation."

Helicopters, truck and even mules ferried election supplies into remote corners of the nation, which has never seen democracy fully take root.

Haiti has long suffered from oppression and instability. The country was ruled for nearly 30 years by dictators Francois ``Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude ``Baby Doc" Duvalier, who fled to France in 1986 amid allegations of human rights violations, mass killings and stealing millions from the national treasury.

Efforts to restore democracy have faltered. Soldiers aborted Haiti's first attempt at free elections in a 1987 bloodbath.

Aristide, then a priest who preached rebellion to slum-dwelling Haitians, won elections in 1990 but served only seven months before the military overthrew him. Aristide was re-elected in 2000.

Associated Press reporters Stevenson Jacobs in Port-au-Prince and Joseph B. Frazier in Gonaives contributed to this report.

EDITORIAL

Haiti still needs help

Our position: It is in the United States' best interest to take the lead after today's elections.

Orlando Sentinel

Posted February 7, 2006

Millions of Haitians are expected to go to the polls today to vote for a president and parliament. But elections by themselves won't end the political turmoil, violence and suffering engulfing the country.

Haiti needs more international help to restore order, so that its new government has a chance to rebuild the country's democracy and economy. And the United States needs to be the leader in that effort.

Washington sent U.S. troops to Haiti in 2004 after a rebellion forced then-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile, but those troops left a few months later. The 9,000-member United Nations peacekeeping force that took over has failed to secure the country.

A collapse in Haiti could turn the country into a haven -- just 700 miles from the United States -- for drug traffickers and terrorists. History says it also would loose a flood of U.S.-bound refugees. In the chaotic two years after Mr. Aristide was first ousted in 1991, the U.S. Coast Guard picked up 41,000 fleeing Haitians at sea.

The United States could help prevent a collapse by temporarily supplementing the U.N. force in Haiti until the new government finds its footing and security is restored. With security, international investors would return, and efforts to improve education, health care and basic services could proceed.

Any commitment of U.S. troops would have to be made cautiously, given the already heavy demands on the military. But if the United States waits and Haiti implodes, Washington might have no choice but to send a much bigger force, for a much longer stay.

U.S. on Haiti's ballot
Palm Beach Post Editorial
Tuesday, February 07, 2006

Haiti is long past the point at which people believe that the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere could slide into dysfunction without some degree of internal security. Even if the four-times-postponed election comes off with some semblance of credibility today, the ongoing lack of stability may only worsen due to lack of leadership by the United States.

As The Post reported Monday, some who have left Haiti in recent days understandably say that they never want to go back. There are legitimate fears that the constant gang warfare and kidnappings will spiral down into the kind of mass murder not seen since the aborted 1987 elections, that machetes again will be the weapon of choice and hacked bodies again will dot the streets. Others with family in Haiti express confidence in promises that the United Nations peacekeeping force, led by Brazil and other nations but not the U.S., will secure the presidential and National Assembly elections.

Haiti has shown such courage before. This time, many of its people will walk 20 miles to vote because authorities did not try to secure polling places in gang-controlled areas. In a way, the U.S. also is on the ballot. After backing the murderous and corrupt Duvalier family during its 30-year rule that ended in 1986, the U.S. used 2,000 troops to restore former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to office in 1994 after a coup had unseated him. Two years ago, the U.S. helped force Mr. Aristide into exile, in favor of the current interim government.

That intervention has not resolved the country's longtime economic and political crisis. Among the 35 candidates to succeed Mr. Aristide are former presidents and hated Army officers, wealthy businessmen and rebel leaders who helped oust him. Any could be in a March 19 runoff — if enough of the intimidated population prevails today in their determination to take responsibility for their nation.

Meanwhile, the U.S. mostly waits. Gov. Bush toured Haiti last year and made much of forming an advisory group, but has since telegraphed that he'll remain quiet unless numbers of Haitians again begin showing up on Florida shores. American inaction could allow Haiti to devolve into civil war for lack of security. But if the Haitians' courage is not enough, there's a selfish reason for the U.S. to care about today's election and what happens in Haiti:

What happens when a hemispheric neighbor leads the list of failed states?

Haiti's day of decision
Tuesday | February 7, 2006
The Jamaica Gleaner

HAITIANS ARE voting today in the hope of ending a period of political chaos and economic depression. Recent years have been troubled and painful for our close neighbour.

An incompetent interim administration, able to control only a small part of the capital city, has led to political confusion and uncertainty. This has been compounded by criminal and factional violence, fuelled by fears among supporters of ex-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide that they were being singled out for unfair treatment, and encouraged by seeming official support for the illegal armed gangs that control many parts of the country.

The election will not bring immediate improvement to the long-suffering people of Haiti. However, it will clear the way for international support for the country.

Haiti's neighbours must help. The Caribbean Community, arguing with justification that it cannot support the overthrow of a properly elected government, has insisted that Haiti restore a democratic administration as a condition for normalising relations.

We hope that this will be done with alacrity after the proper conclusion of the election, despite lingering concerns within the region about the likely impact of embracing Haiti.

It would be unreasonable for Haiti's neighbours to continue asking for international help for the country, without themselves making a meaningful contribution, as limited as this may be.

It is also critical to the future of Haiti that the result of the election be accepted by the international community. We note already the descriptions in parts of Washington of Mr. René Preval, the front-runner, as a 'clone' of Mr. Aristide, with suggestions that a Lavalas administration would not be welcomed by the United States.

If this were to be the official view, it would deny the people of Haiti the benefit of exercising their democratic rights. The choice of the people must be accepted and supported by all.

There are no mysteries about what should be the priorities for the new Haitian administration. Haiti needs political peace and a dismantling of the gangs that have taken over much of the country.

The country also needs immediate and significant economic assistance. This should not only be short-term aid, but should be a well financed and properly structured economic programme to encourage steady economic expansion.

The country needs reform and restructuring of its institutions, particularly the judiciary, the constabulary and local government authorities. There is also a demand for improvement to key elements of physical and utility infrastructure, such as roads, ports, telecommunications and power.

We hope that today's election will deliver a credible result, clearing the way for Haitians to make yet another attempt at political order and economic development.

Haiti's Hope
New York Sun Editorial
February 7, 2006

Today will be as much of a banner day as war-riven Haiti can hope for. Not only does it mark the 20th anniversary of the end of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier's dictatorship, but Haitians have the opportunity to go to the polls for the best shot they've had in years at a fair election. It won't be the most elegant election; dozens of candidates from dozens of parties are vying for the presidency and a run-off seems certain, while in order to cast ballots voters will have to brave violent streets. But hundreds of thousands of identification cards have been issued, voter rolls have been prepared, ballots have been printed and distributed to polling places, and 10,000 police officers and United Nations troops will seek to keep the peace.

For Haiti, which has not experienced a period of stable, democratic government for 200 years, this marks progress. Yet one would never know the news today was good if you were reading the New York Times, which issued on January 29, under the headline "Mixed U.S. Signals Helped Tilt Haiti Toward Chaos," a dispatch suggesting the Bush administration spent its early years allowing an independent prodemocracy group run by Republicans to subvert its official policy. The report, on the travails of a former American ambassador to Haiti, Brian Dean Curran, suggests that the International Republican Institute, and especially one of its one-time operatives, Stanley Lucas, discouraged opposition groups from negotiating with the then-president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, precipitating Mr. Aristide's violent overthrow and flight into exile. This supposedly had the effect of plunging Haiti into new depths of chaos.

The thing to mark about this kind of Aristide apologism is that it's hard to find anyone to credit the theory other than Mr. Curran or friends of the deposed despot. The former assistant secretary of state who supervised Mr. Curran's work in Haiti, Otto Reich, disputes the Times suggestion that the Bush administration was split in respect of Haiti, with Secretary Powell on one side and Mr. Reich - and later Mr. Reich's successor, Roger Noriega - on the other. He'd told the Times, "There was a change in policy that was perhaps not well perceived by some people in the embassy. We wanted to change, to give the Haitians an opportunity to choose a democratic leader." The Times article quotes Secretary Powell, as saying "that the American policy in Haiti was what Mr. Curran believed it to be," implying that the I.R.I. was acting contrary to that official policy. However, in an as-yet unpublished letter to the editor of the Times, the president of the I.R.I., Lorne Craner, reports that Mr. Powell told one of the Times reporters, Walt Bogdanich, that he "didn't accept [the] view that he differed with his Assistant Secretaries over Haiti policy."

The broader issue is important. In the two years since Mr. Aristide was forced out of office, he has inspired an odd sort of reverence from some Americans, such as Senators Boxer and Dodd and Mr. Curran. Under this theory, Mr. Aristide had been democratically elected and it was destabilizing for an American administration, with or without the help of the I.R.I., to either allow or encourage a chain of events that led to his ouster. But the truth is quite the contrary. Mr. Aristide's rule was marked by corruption and terrible violence. His own ouster was eventually orchestrated in large part by a violent

gang known as the Cannibal Army that Mr. Aristide himself had encouraged and that came to be run by the brother of a drug runner whose murder Mr. Aristide was said to have ordered.

The interim Haitian government's ambassador to America, Raymond Joseph, who is on leave from the editorship of the Haiti Observateur in New York and a column in The New York Sun, told us in response to the Times article, "Mr. Aristide himself put Haiti in chaos," not the efforts of any American aid worker or administration official. It was understood, albeit to different degrees, by both the Clinton and Bush administrations that Mr. Aristide was not a positive force in Haiti. The Bush administration was decidedly less willing to humor him with endless rounds of negotiations with opponents who just didn't trust him to deal fairly. And as opposition mounted, Mr. Bush was not willing to put American troops in danger to defend a dishonest, undemocratic dictator.

The alternative - allowing an armed rebellion to force Mr. Aristide into exile - wasn't perfect but, as Mr. Reich noted to us, "the decision was between several bad options." The investigations editor of the Times, Matt Purdy, defended his reporters' work in an e-mail yesterday, saying it "is an accurate and balanced portrait of what they learned from American government documents and interviews with dozens of participants in Haiti and the United States, including the former Secretary of State, Colin Powell." Maybe I.R.I.'s letter will be in the Times this morning - or not. The big news today is not the disgruntlement of a former ambassador. It is that the departure of Mr. Aristide has given Haiti the opportunity to start the long process of picking itself up. If it works it will be a victory not only for Haiti but for the Bush administration's faith in democracy.

COMMENTARY

Elections and democracy in Haiti: Chronicle of a catastrophe

Caribbean Net News

02-07-2006

by Laurie Knop

On February 29, 2004, the democratically elected President of Haiti, Jean Bertrand Aristide was ousted. Most sectors of the Haitian society, in particular, the sectors who participated in the movement that overthrew Aristide, hoped that a new era for a real democratization process was opening its doors in Haiti.

A transitional government was set up with what most of us believed were technocrats, coming mainly from outside of Haiti, to develop the conditions for a fair electoral process.

Haiti has a history of going down the path of democracy only to later crash and burn. The interim government of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue came with the promise of turning over a new democratic leaf in Haiti with the support of the international community.

The United Nations opened a massive mission in June 2004 which has had two main objectives; one: creating the conditions for security that includes disarmament of the armed gangs as well as reforming and reinforcing the national police and the justice system as a whole and two: aiding in the organization of fair and transparent elections.

After pushing back the elections three times already, the transitional government and the electoral council issued a decree to obey to the injunction of the Security Council to organize the election on February 7, 2006.

The fundamental question: Is Haiti ready for elections this year?

Holding elections is just one small component of the problem. We should, in fact, be asking the more important question, Is Haiti ready to hold fair and democratically accepted elections? Being ready means not only from a technical standpoint, but also from a political and social standpoint.

Today, the overriding discourse from the government, many of the local political parties and the international community is that the elections must happen. Does this mean we should hold elections under any conditions, however bad they may be? Does it not matter that Haiti might not be ready to hold fair elections today?

What is at stake?

Elections have become synonymous with democracy – as if the way to democracy is through elections; meaning if you hold elections you will have a democratic government. But the question remains, how can we possibly have a democratic electoral process in Haiti if we still lack the democratic values and understandings to shape the electoral process itself.

Today, in Haiti, the international community is detaching the results from the process; as if the process was just a minor detail in the production of the end result; the elections.

Such a short view may be a result of the lack of capacity on the part of the international observers such as the OAS and the UN mission. Or there might be a conscious and deliberate attempt to create a critical situation that will further weaken the Haitian society in its attempt to pull out of the current imbroglio.

This would allow the international community to step in to establish a protectorate in Haiti, which would be governed by the United Nations.

What is happening today?

The February 29, 2004 ousting of Aristide has, unfortunately, not solved the crisis in Haiti. In fact, the crisis has only deepened. The transitional government has failed to create the conditions for an effective and sane democratic process.

The two main priorities of this transitional government over the last two years should have been (i); the organization of a fair electoral process and (ii): the reconciliation amongst the Haitians.

The transition should have been a unique and historical opportunity in the context of the 200th anniversary of the Haitian Republic (2004) as well as the 200th anniversary of the assassination of the historical founder of Haitian nationalism, J.J. Dessalines, to reconcile the Haitian population and attempt to resolve the crisis that continues to impede the political, social and economical development of the country.

In fact, the political amateurism of the Latortue government has without a doubt contributed in prolonging and deepening the crisis.

For instance, Latortue went to Gonaives after the devastation of Tropical Storm Jeanne in September 2004 and promised the population his government would construct a four lane highway to link their town with Port au Prince. He also promised complete reconstruction of their devastated town where more than 3,000 Haitians lost their lives.

But like the government before him, Latortue has blindly ignored the blatant and massive corruption spearheaded by members of the local government who are closely associated to the Latortue himself, and everything that he has promised to the devastated town of Gonaives has not yet come to fruition. The town is still a complete disaster, almost 2 years after the passage of TS Jeanne.

As the February 7 date for the presidential election looms near, USAID has recently funded a poll that shows Renee Preval, who was President in Haiti from 1995 – 2000, as being the most popular candidate. There are also two other candidates who could be possible challengers making for a second round of elections.

The first is Charles Baker, a fifty-year-old prominent businessman with US residency who led civic group 184 to unseat Aristide in 2004. He enjoys the support of the bourgeoisie.

Leslie Manigat is the second credible challenger. He is also a former president who was forced from power by the military in 1988. He enjoys the support of Haiti's small middle class.

If Baker defeats Manigat and faces Preval, it is most likely that the middle class will support Preval because there is, in fact, a large mistrust towards the bourgeoisie which historically has not proven to have any concern of the majority of Haiti's population.

What does this mean: Renee Preval maintains a high probability to win the upcoming election.

What will happen?

Preval as a president will have the support of the so-called popular sector, mainly the poor masses that occupy the popular areas, such as Cite Soleil. Despite his claim of being independent from Aristide and the Lavalas party, the Lavalas network on the ground will become on the short to medium term, a political necessity for Preval.

Violence has become more and more a political instrument in the last few years and the tendency may considerably increase in the future; in particular because Preval will become the man to oust.

He will definitely face challenges to stabilize his power; the reason being that many sectors, including political parties, the bourgeoisie, the ex-rebel army who are still armed and the drug lords, will feel insecure in their habit of their extortion of state resources.

They do not yet know who Preval will support and how. In Haiti, everyone wants his or her piece of the pie.

Sadly, it looks as if the upcoming elections will not have any positive impact on the future of Haiti as so many Haitians had hoped. In fact we are going down the same road again and this is most likely due to the fact that no one has put credence in the idea that the process of elections should be more important than the election.

Just because you hold elections does not mean that it is democratic. If you do not work with the population as a whole to instill democratic values, democracy will never be able to take hold.

Laurie Knop is the Director of the QIFD Haiti Field Office (Quisqueya International Organization for Freedom & Development), a US-based NGO,

A look at Haiti's troubled history

Associated Press

San Jose Mercury News

Feb. 7, 2006

Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, has long been one of its most troubled as well. Only once has a democratically elected president, Rene Preval, completed his term. Preval was among 33 candidates in Tuesday's presidential election.

Highlights of Haiti's political history:

_ Haiti won independence from France in 1804 following a slave rebellion led by Toussaint Louverture. Over two centuries of political turmoil and economic despair, the country has seen 32 coups. The United States occupied Haiti from 1915-34.

_ In 1957, Francois Duvalier, a doctor known as "Papa Doc," was elected president, beginning a 28-year dictatorship by the Duvalier family. His son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, known as "Baby Doc," fled the country in 1986.

_ A council of military and civilian officials took over the government after Jean-Claude Duvalier fled; after violence and an election boycott, Gen. Henri Namphy seized control in 1988. A series of palace coups followed.

_ In 1990, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former priest known with a following among the poor, won the presidency in a landslide election. He was deposed in a military coup in 1991, and was restored to power in 1994 by U.S. troops.

_ Rene Preval, Aristide's prime minister in 1991, served what many considered a placeholder term as president from 1996 to 2001, when he became the first president in Haiti's history to leave office voluntarily at the end of his term.

_ Aristide, who was barred by the constitution from serving two consecutive terms, was returned to power in a vote marred by an opposition boycott and low turnout. He was ousted following a violent rebellion in 2004 and now lives in exile in South Africa.

Chaos and confusion, but no violence as Haitians cast ballots

BY LETTA TAYLER

Newsday, NY

Feb. 7, 2006

The 33 candidates vying for Haiti's presidency range from a former coup leader to an armed rebel to a follower of playboy-dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. If no candidate wins more than half the vote, the two top vote-getters will face a runoff.

CANDIDATES INCLUDE:

RENÉ PRÉVAL

Front-runner and a former ally of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide who served as president from 1995 to 2000

CHARLES HENRI BAKER

Prominent businessman who supported Aristide's ouster

LESLIE MANIGAT

Former president, septuagenarian businessman who was ousted by the military in 1988 after five months in power

GUY PHILIPPE

Former army officer who helped lead the 2004 revolt against Aristide

MARC BAZIN

Former World Bank official who was prime minister under the military regime that ousted Aristide in 1991 but served in Aristide's cabinet after the latter was restored to power

EVANS PAUL

Former Port-au-Prince mayor who was tortured under former dictatorships

HUBERT DERONCERAY

Cabinet minister under Jean-Claude Duvalier

HIMLER REBUS

Former army colonel who led a failed coup in the 1990s

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- Enraged by massive disorganization and hours-long delays to cast ballots, voters stormed polling centers and scuffled with United Nations peacekeepers Tuesday in the first presidential election since an armed revolt two years ago pushed Haiti to the brink of collapse.

At least two people were killed and several others injured in stampedes in the capital of Port-au-Prince, where police lobbed teargas to stop voters who were tearing down metal gates to enter gigantic, hopelessly understaffed polling stations.

Nevertheless, the balloting was free of the organized violence that has ravaged many elections here, prompting Haitian and international officials to hail it as a critical step in re-planting democracy in the hemisphere's poorest and one of its most troubled nations.

"Haitians are doing it. They have overcome their fear to come to the polls," U.S. Ambassador Tim Carney told Newsday.

A 9,300-strong UN peacekeeping force has struggled to maintain order in this Maryland-sized nation of 8 million since the armed ouster in February 2004 of Haiti's popular but controversial President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Chaos was greatest outside Cité Soleil, a gang-ruled slum so volatile that election officials refused to place polling centers there, directing voters to instead cast ballots in industrial buildings on the periphery.

Hundreds of angry Cité Soleil residents marched through streets jammed with UN tanks and littered with piles of burning garbage, waving their voting cards and shouting that they'd been turned away at their designated polling centers on the periphery. Other protesters said they'd waited six or more hours to cast ballots.

"The bourgeoisie is trying to stage an electoral coup so the poor people can't vote their choice," screamed demonstrator Paul Ery, 45, who like most Cité Soleil residents is jobless. "We don't have food, we don't have work, we don't have schools and now we can't even vote."

If the winner isn't frontrunner René Préval, a former president and the favored candidate of the poor who comprise 70 percent of the population, "we'll take to the streets," Ely warned.

Fanning the flames, some Cité Soleil gang members and community leaders zooming around on motorscooters erroneously told residents and media that police had opened fire on voters, killing one and wounding several others.

Haitian authorities urged calm and extended polling hours from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. with a promise that everyone in line by then will be able to vote. In a desperate attempt to beef up several polling centers

where ballots arrived hours late or workers had simply failed to show, officials began pulling volunteers from voting lines and giving them crash courses in helping run polling booths.

That effort was too late to prevent a woman and an elderly man from being asphyxiated during crushes at two separate polling centers in the capital, among several that opened three or more hours later.

Once doors opened, some voters crawled under UN soldiers' feet to squeeze into voting centers. Some then waited an hour or more in one line, only to be redirected to another line _ or told their name didn't appear on voting rolls even though they had brand new voting cards.

"It's a sham," fumed voter Lithiane Miliace, 51, as she was turned away. "I spent six hours today trying to vote and the election workers can't even tell me where I'm supposed to go."

Both the UN and the Organization of American States have tried to prop up the voting process, which was managed by a Haitian provisional electoral council.

Préval, a former Aristide protégé who was president from 1996-2001 and is the only elected leader in Haitian history to peacefully serve his full term, was widely expected to place first by a wide margin in the 35-way presidential race. With many ballots being hauled up to seven hours by nearly 300 mules, horses and donkeys from almost impassable mountain hamlets, even early results weren't expected until at least Wednesday.

If no candidate wins a majority, a second round of balloting will be held between the top two vote-getters March 19. Voters also are casting ballots for the 129-seat national parliament.

Enthusiasm high for Haiti presidential vote

By JOSEPH B. FRAZIER

The Associated Press

The Seattle Times

Feb. 7, 2006

GONAIVES, Haiti — Mules laden with sacks of ballots were led into Haiti's countryside Monday to reach remote villages on the eve of elections aimed at reviving Haiti's experiment with democracy.

Hours before polls open today, thousands of U.N. peacekeepers fanned out to guard against attacks by heavily armed gangs, some of them loyal to Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the president ousted in a rebellion two years ago.

José Miguel Insulza, secretary-general of the Organization of American States, said Monday that he expected turnout to be high.

"We have seen ... a lot of enthusiasm to vote," he said in Port-au-Prince, the capital.

In his northern hometown of Marmalade, the presidential front-runner, René Preval, said he was satisfied with his campaign. "I'm tired, but I am happy," Preval said Sunday night. "It is an important election for the Haitian people."

Authorities on Monday urged Haitians to turn out in large numbers to vote and rejected the possibility that fraud could taint the results.

"Haiti's future depends on this vote," Jacques Bernard, director general of the electoral council, said in Port-au-Prince. "Good elections are the only solution to saving our nation."

He defended a decision not to put voting stations inside the sprawling, seaside slum of Cité Soleil, a base for armed gangs blamed for a wave of kidnappings in the capital.

Residents of Cité Soleil accuse officials of trying to disenfranchise them, but officials say they can vote at polling stations just outside the slum.

Bernard said Cité Soleil, an area that even heavily armed U.N. peacekeepers using tank-like vehicles have not fully penetrated, is too dangerous for election workers.

"It's a moral question. I couldn't ask an election worker to go into an area that I myself wouldn't go," he said.

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Haiti poll challenge for democracy

Tuesday, February 7, 2006

CNN

GONAIVES, Haiti (AP) -- Mules laden with sacks of ballots and other election materials were led into Haiti's countryside Monday to reach remote villages on the eve of elections aimed at putting Haiti's experiment with democracy back on track.

Hours before polls open, thousands of U.N. peacekeepers fanned out to guard against attacks by heavily armed gangs, some of whom are loyal to former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, ousted in a rebellion two years ago.

Other Haitians blame continuing violence on police, wealthy businessmen and even some of the minor presidential candidates.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan on Monday issued a message to Haitians just before sending his latest report on the country to the U.N. Security Council.

"I call on all parties to respect the outcome of the elections, and on the incoming leadership to demonstrate commitment to reconciliation and inclusiveness," the secretary-general said.

The report recommends the U.N. mission, whose mandate expires on February 15, be extended for six months to permit time for assessment of its role following the presidential and parliamentary elections.

Jose Miguel Insulza, secretary-general of the Organization of American States, said in an interview with The Associated Press on Monday that he expected a massive turnout at the polls.

"We have seen ... a lot of enthusiasm to vote," he said in Port-au-Prince, the capital.

Speaking Sunday night in his northern hometown of Marmalade, presidential front-runner Rene Preval said he was satisfied with his campaign.

"I'm tired but I am happy," Preval said in an interview with AP Television News. "It is an important election for the Haitian people."

Authorities on Monday urged Haitians to turn out in large numbers to vote, and rejected the possibility that fraud could taint the results.

"Haiti's future depends on this vote," Jacques Bernard, director general of the electoral council, told a news conference in Port-au-Prince. "Good elections are the only solution to saving our nation."

He defended a decision not to put voting stations inside the sprawling, seaside slum of Cite Soleil, a base for the armed gangs blamed for a wave of kidnappings in the capital.

Residents of Cite Soleil accuse officials of trying to disenfranchise them, but noted that they can vote at polling stations set up 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) outside the slum.

Bernard said Cite Soleil, an area that even heavily armed U.N. peacekeepers using tank-like vehicles have not fully penetrated, was simply too dangerous for election workers.

"It's a moral question. I couldn't ask an election worker to go into an area that I myself wouldn't go," he said.

Underscoring the difficulty of staging elections in a country where the infrastructure is a wreck, mules were enlisted to carry election materials to areas where U.N. helicopters cannot land. The elections have been postponed four times since October because of delays in distributing election materials and because of security problems.

At dawn Monday, a dozen Uruguayan peacekeepers loaded five mules with sacks stuffed with ballots, ballot boxes and other election materials in the rural town of Archaie, just north of the capital. The mules trotted off on a seven-hour trek to a polling station in a remote mountain hamlet.

The presidential election pits 33 candidates against each other, including two former presidents, a former rebel in the armed insurgency that forced Aristide from office, and a former army officer accused in the death of a leading Haitian journalist. If no candidate wins a majority of votes, a March 19 runoff would be held between the top two candidates.

Daunting challenges

Hundreds of candidates are also running for 129 parliamentary seats.

The election has been billed as a move to restore democracy. But it is a daunting task to build up a country with so little to build on. After decades of brain drain, capital flight, corruption and crippling problems in the judicial, security and health care systems, the hemisphere's poorest nation needs more than a quick electoral fix, experts say.

The 70-mile (120-kilometer) drive from Port-au-Prince to the northern town of Gonaives takes four hours, on roads that are far from Haiti's worst.

Most of the nation is deforested, its topsoil vulnerable to being washed away. When each year's hurricanes hit, catastrophic floods often follow. Land plots grow smaller as the population grows and farmers exhaust the already-tired soil.

Robert Rotberg, a Haiti specialist at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, says the solution may be beyond the capacity of any Haitian president to handle.

"Basically the only thing that can alter Haiti's projection is to put it under some OAS or U.N. total supervision, something akin to a trusteeship," he said.

But even in a teeming Gonaives marketplace, where the women hunkered Monday over small piles of fruit, bags of salt, tinware or skull-buster chili peppers, people seem to have hope.

"I hope the elections go in a good way and that the president changes the country," Rosseleine Jeanbaptiste said as she guarded piles of garlic and okra.

"We don't want to keep living like this."

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Vote problems anger, worry Haiti's poorest voters

07 Feb 2006

Source: Reuters

By Kieran Murray

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti Lucia Destimus has seen decades of dictatorship and military coups. Struggling to vote for Haiti's president on Tuesday, she said the rich have found a peaceful new way to steal democracy from the poor.

Crushed in a huge crowd at a polling center in the Haitian capital, the reed-thin 69-year-old looked around and said she believed long waits and teeming crowds on election day were designed to stop the poor from voting.

"They don't want us to have a say in this country," said Destimus, a resident of the teeming Cite Soleil slum.

"They want to keep us from voting. They are abusing us," she said, hungry in the midday heat after getting up well before dawn and walking about 3 miles (5 km) to vote. "I've never seen an election like this, and I don't like it."

The leading candidate was Rene Preval, a former president and protege of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the fiery champion of the poor ousted in 2004. Some critics of Aristide, whom some Haiti experts say was undermined by Washington before he was driven from power, have worried that a Preval victory could pave the way for Aristide's return.

If the poor cannot vote, it would hurt the chances for Preval, who draws his strongest support from the slums.

Election officials acknowledged long delays but put them down simply to logistic problems and said the election was a success because there was no violence.

Many of Haiti's poor, however, had suspected foul play before Tuesday, and the delays fueled their anger as well as conspiracy theories and talk of violence.

Outside many voting stations in the capital Port-au-Prince, voters endured lines that ran far down the streets. Inside, voting began hours late.

Overwhelmed workers tried to keep thousands of voters at bay as they prepared ballot boxes but in the swarm, voting slips were handed back and forth and some fell to the ground.

"The rich are trying to steal the elections. We will not let them. If they do, we will fight them," said Jean Biemaime, a young resident of another shantytown.

Aristide was twice elected president but failed to serve a full term. He was toppled once by a military coup and then two years ago in the rebellion backed by former army officers.

Aristide's supporters believe the rich elite will always oppose democracy because, in a country where the vast majority are poor, it would force them to share their wealth.

The election was held exactly 20 years after the ouster of dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, but crushing poverty, rampant crime and deep distrust between rich and poor show how far Haiti still must go to set up a stable democracy.

Like many others, Destimus says she is much worse off now than under the Duvalier family dictatorship.

"We had no freedom and we didn't like them but we had food," she said, adding that Aristide did more than any other leader to try to improve the lives of the poor. "He was a good president. That is why they took him away."

Former president favored in Haiti vote
Front-runner Preval an ex-protege of exiled Aristide
Tuesday, February 7, 2006
CNN

GONAIVES, Haiti -- Under the close watch of thousands of police and U.N. peacekeepers, Haitians flocked to -- and at times, overwhelmed -- polling places to cast ballots for the first time in six years for president and members of parliament.

In this poor Caribbean nation that has been wracked with political instability and corruption, many praise the election and the ensuing enthusiasm as a key step toward democracy.

Tens of thousands marched to the polls in the early morning hours, and long lines developed as delays occurred at some stations. Haitian election officials confirmed that polls will stay open a bit longer than usual because of logistical problems.

There have been reports of tempers flaring, pushing, shoving and tussles in the long lines, but no major violence.

Juan Gabriel Valdez, chief of the U.N. mission, said, "My first impression, well, it's that I'm hopeful that what I see as a climate of peace and participation will continue during the day."

But one observer said he was concerned that the long lines could cause problems, especially if the polls are forced to stay open past their 4 p.m. closing time. "The lines are very backed-up, and that the voting may continue past 4 and this could mean a long delay, and in some places there are not lights, but we are prepared for everything. There are many people in the voting centers," said Jose Miguel Insulza, secretary-general of the Organization of American States.

Another observer, Chris Hennemeyer, said he thought the day was "going pretty well," adding that he hadn't seen any signs of violence despite the scuffles and hot tempers.

In Port-au-Prince, the capital, "dedicated and patriotic" Haitians formed long lines to vote, Hennemeyer said, estimating that the voters are "willing to stand there until midnight if they have to in order to vote."

"There are long lines of people waiting very patiently in very hot weather. There are some technical difficulties," Hennemeyer said, "but what I'm seeing are elections that -- at least my small sample of them -- that are proceeding quite well given the circumstances of Haiti."

Polls suggested that former President Rene Preval was the favorite among 33 candidates to succeed Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who has been in exile since his ouster in 2004. (Candidate profiles)

Preval, who was president from 1996 to 2000 and a former Aristide protege, has distanced himself from the exiled leader during the campaign.

Other prominent candidates include wealthy industrialist Charles Baker and former President Leslie Manigat, ousted in 1988.

If no one gains more than 50 percent of the vote, the top two candidates will meet March 19 in a runoff.

Struggle for peacekeepers

For U.N. forces organizing the election, every step has been a challenge. Frequent gunbattles in Haiti's worst slums have forced them to travel in armored vehicles.

About 7,500 troops and nearly 800 police in the U.N. stabilization force were helping Haitian police keep watch and attempting to preserve calm in the country, which long has suffered from widespread poverty and violence.

Also, Human Rights Watch said illegal arms still circulate in Haiti and "criminal gangs continue to terrorize people living in urban slums."

After several postponements, U.N. officials said they are confident the vote will move forward peacefully.

"These elections offer an opportunity for your country to move away from violence and uncertainty toward a future of peace and stability," U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Monday, delivering a message issued in English, French and Creole.

Checkered political past

In a recent report on the polling, Human Rights Watch noted that "in the past, elections in Haiti have often been marred by violence, disorganization and fraud."

In 1971, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, then 19, became Haiti's "president for life" after the death of his father, Francois, aka "Papa Doc," but economic and political instability forced him out in 1986.

Aristide was elected president in 1990, but the Haitian military arrested him in September 1991 and then ousted him from the country. He returned to power three years later after the U.N. Security Council threatened an invasion of Haiti by a multinational force and military leaders agreed to step down.

After Preval held office in the late '90s, Aristide won the 2000 election. An armed uprising in 2004 and pressure from the U.S. and French governments forced Aristide into exile.

U.S.-led forces went to restore order and then transferred power to a U.N. stabilization force.

CNN's Morgan Neill and freelance reporter Amy Bracken contributed to this report.

Haiti's election: Hope for a better future

OUR OPINION: POLITICAL FACTIONS NEED TO UNITE BEHIND COMMON GOALS

Miami Herald

Feb. 7, 2006

Haitians voting today -- walking miles to do so in some cases -- know what they want: jobs, schools, stability. They now need political leaders committed to delivering what the people want, instead of warring over politics. It is hoped that today's vote also produces credible results. Fair elections can help create an opportunity to restore order, maintain international support, attract foreign investors -- and ultimately to rebuild Haiti's economy and social fabric.

Ready as ever

Getting to this Election Day has been a long slog. Thanks largely to the U.N. mission, Haiti is as ready as it has ever been for a democratic election. An estimated 3.5 million Haitians have registered, and 90 percent of them have registration cards. Steps have been taken to prevent fraud, including thousands of domestic observers and hundreds of international observers monitoring the vote.

Unfortunately, the U.S. government declined to provide military helicopters to help with the elections, and waited until days before the vote to make the decision. U.S. helicopters could have helped to transport ballots from remote polling sites. Now, U.N. authorities have only 11 helicopters, and election officials have hired 180 mules to help carry the voting materials.

Whatever the preparation, little could ensure that the vote will be perfect. There's always the chance of snafus, attempted fraud or violence incited by armed groups in Haiti.

With 33 candidates vying for president, presidential front-runner René Préval is not assured of the margin needed for a first-round victory, though he is likely to get that on the second-round ballot. Mr. Préval, a former ally of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was elected president following Mr. Aristide's first term. Mr. Préval's administration was characterized by political gridlock with an opposition legislature and escalating gang violence.

Pressing needs

There are lessons here for Mr. Préval and all Haitian political leaders, particularly since no potential presidential winner is likely to get a legislative majority. Political opponents have to reconcile their differences and agree to a common agenda if Haiti is to have hope for future improvement. There is no lack of pressing needs: a professional police force and judiciary; a port not controlled by gangs; education, healthcare and utilities; roads and other infrastructure; environmental restoration. The international community should encourage political reconciliation, especially in the interim before the expected second-round vote. The U.N. mandate in Haiti must also be extended beyond the current Feb. 15 deadline. Haiti deserves a long-term commitment, particularly from the United States.

IRI Election Manipulation in Haiti
Jeb Sprague interviewed by
Dennis Bernstein
February 07, 2006
ZNet

Dennis Bernstein: Joining us is also regarding the situation in Haiti is Jeb Sprague, an investigative journalist and graduate student from Long Beach, California. He has a research blog at www.freehaiti.net where you can see the FOIA documents requests detailing USAID and the International Republican Institute activities in Haiti. Jeb thanks for joining us.

Jeb Sprague: Thanks Denis.

Dennis Bernstein: Well its very good to have you. First of all remind people what the NED is the National Endowment for Democracy, just incase people have been living under the planet. and their relationship to the IRI international Republican Institute

Jeb Sprague: Ok well first of all, tying in with what Kevin said about this media creation, what we also see is a political creation. and this has been going on for many years now. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was founded in the early 1980's under the influence of Ronald Reagan for "supporting democracy abroad". So we've had that going on for years. The NED basically does overtly what the CIA used to do covertly. It funds civil society groups and organizations that fit within U.S. strategic interests in various countries. For 2006 the NED budget is approximately 80 million dollars.. and in Haiti its \$541,000 for 2005 and approximately the same for 2006.

Dennis Bernstein: And its skyrocketing over the last 5 years. It sort of went from nothing to what it is now.. So *now* the NED through the IRI is infiltrating, they have a very special kind of infiltration. We here on flashpoints, along with Anthony Fenton broke the story on the NED infiltrating the press, but now they are focusing on infiltrating the left.

Jeb Sprague: Exactly, and where this money is coming from is USAID.. The united states agency for international development... and the nice thing about it coming from USAID is that you cannot FOIA the NED, or IRI, or NDI because these are all quasi private organizations but USAID is part of the government so we can get FOIA requests from them. With recent FOIA requests that I've made we know have the documentation to show that the IRI is working to facilitate these left groups. I'll just read real briefly:

"Since 2002, IRI has formulated seminars, targeted at women and youth from political parties and civil society, on campaign management, political party structure, fundraising, polling, political communication, platform development and the uses of Internet Technology to strengthen political parties . . .From July 31 to August 1, 2004, leaders of left of center parties, Ayiti Kapab, KONAKOM, OPL, and PANPRA met to discuss ways to accelerate a merge and the various techniques needed to advance the goal at the municipal level. At the end of the session, they put in place a work plan for the departments and municipalities to implement the merger of the four parties, now called the Groupe Socialiste."

So basically what we have is the IRI working primarily on the municipal level in Haiti, not [as much] on the presidential level, but on the municipal level in Haiti to create these socialist coalitions, leftist coalitions, to oppose the popular party of the poor in Haiti, Fanmi Lavalas.

Dennis Bernstein: So you wouldn't say that they are actually working to support the left and the right. But what they are working to create a left that is not really the left.

Jeb Sprague: Exactly, well they are also working with Right parties. Like Anthony Fenton has said in Haiti, "the left is the right" when we are discussing these parties, the OPL, FUSION. And then other important research has shown that Marc Bazin, who heads up the union pour Haiti, which has been called the "moderate part of Lavalas", has also been facilitated by the International Republican Institute. And in multiple mainstream press articles on Haiti they always point out marc bazin's "moderate Lavalas" group to show that Lavalas has splintered. So basically that shows that the IRI has worked to create this perception of a splintered Lavalas movement.

Dennis Bernstein: Well, saying that Marc Bazin is the moderate Lavalas is like saying President Fox in Mexico is the moderate Zapatistas. I mean everybody in the streets in Haiti and in Cite Soleil must have a really good laugh on that. Because Marc Bazin was obviously the candidate of the World Bank, the U.S. tried to prop him up back in the day. No body accepted him but yet this sort of collective amnesia on the part of the media makes it possible for him to start over.

Jeb Sprague: Yeah, its part of this media creation, media campaign. And then we also have the presidential candidate of OPL, Paul Dennis, who also worked with the IRI and now he's working already before the election has been run he's already working to discredit the election. In a recent interview with journalist and Group 184 supporter Nancy Roc he talks about how, he says he already has doubts about the legitimacy of the election and sees a confrontation in Haiti. and also we have other groups that called for the resignation of the elected government in 2004, we have groups such as Batay Ouvriye and PAPDA. These are left labor and NGO affiliated groups that are becoming dependent on US and Canadian government funding, while attacking Lavalas and Rene Preval's party Lespwa, from the left. So we have this sort of broad encirclement where these democracy promotion programs are not only supporting right organizations and right parties but also "left" parties and "left" organizations.

Dennis Bernstein: And thus infiltrating in a very deep way. Ok so here's the crucial question.. Help us understand how USAID, IRI, the NED, whatever initials you want to put on the state department here, their covert actions have directly impacted or plan to impact the elections for tomorrow?

Jeb Sprague: Well as far as the elections, ok, so lets say Rene Preval wins. What if these far right or "left" parties, facilitated by the IRI, dominate the Haitian parliament, the municipal elections? So what they can do then from their is they can force Rene Preval to appoint a right wing prime minister or a compliant prime minister. So these planners at the IRI, in Washington DC, they know they can't win the presidential election in Haiti but they can still influence the process by propping up all of these smalls factions. Haiti has dozens of political parties like this and they are being propped up by these USAID "democratization" programs.

Dennis Bernstein: All right, so in terms of the documents what do you find the most interesting, the most damning. Because I certainly want to urge people to check out <http://www.freehaiti.net>

Jeb Sprague: Well just the language the IRI uses is very revealing. And also another FOIA that you will see on there is a \$3 million grant from USAID to UNOPS, which is the UN's civil program in Haiti. And there is a quote in their where UNOPS' first goal with this \$3 million grant is to "even the playing field". And what's also interesting is that reportedly Rene Preval's party is not taking any of this money from UNOPS, this \$3million grant, this money [and support] that is distributed. So what's happening is that UNOPS is receiving this money from USAID to complete this election cycle, working with these groups that took part and supported the coup.

Denis Bernstein: Well "even the playing field".. another phrase that could be used their "exterminate the pro-democracy movement Lavalas movement". That's what they consider "even the playing field", undermining the movement that they don't happen to like, although it does represent the will of the Haitian people. Jeb Sprague, we thank you so much for your great work, again the website www.freehaiti.net , check out your FOIA requests what you got, and we thank you for the good investigation.

Jeb Sprague: Thank you so much Dennis.

Dennis Bernstein: You're listening to Flashpoint radio. You can also go check out www.haitiaction.net

For Haiti's Peasants, Democracy Measured in Steps

Originally: Scant voting stations will force much of Haiti's rural population to travel hours by foot to cast a ballot in the upcoming general election, should they choose to vote.

Jacqueline Charles, 2006-02-07

**Haiti Democracy Project web page item #3435 (<http://www.haitipolicy.org>)
jcharles@MiamiHerald.com**

BELO, Haiti - Deep in these mountains where peasants live off the land and bony cows graze on barren hills, the desire for change is as sharp as the chilling air.

But whether residents here and in other rural communities in this poverty-stricken nation cast their ballots in presidential and legislative elections Tuesday may depend on how far the peasants are willing to walk.

There will be less than half the number of voting centers compared to the last elections in 2000. Electoral officials say they cut the number because they wanted to reduce the chances for fraud and make it easier to secure the voting centers.

That decision still had candidates upset Sunday, even as they officially brought the campaign to an end. Many candidates are concerned that the peasants, many of whom live miles away from any road, may not make what could be an hours-long trek to cast their ballots.

"We are concerned, even though we believe they will come out to vote," said Hans Tippenhauer, who is working with the campaign of Charles Henri Baker, a businessman who polls show running second in the presidential race.

Tippenhauer said if there is violence come Tuesday -- the first election since a violent revolt forced President Jean Bertrand Aristide to surrender power -- some voters could become discouraged from taking the long walks required to vote.

Election authorities have hired 180 mules to carry the voting materials to and from some of the more remote polling places in this grindingly poor country, where even major roads are broken by potholes and washouts.

U.N. advisors and others downplay the concerns saying peasants are accustomed to walking great distances to go to church and school.

Pierre Jacques is among those who says he will have to get up early to vote. He lives not far from a farm village in the mountains high above Port-au-Prince, and says there's no question he will walk the three hours to vote.

"I am obliged to go," he said.

Jacques, who is torn between Baker and former president and front-runner René Préval, said he views Tuesday's elections as an opportunity to bring about change and end the lack of security and economic stagnation since Aristide's ouster.

"I would like for us to come out of the situation we are in," he said.

The desire for change is high in the countryside, with voters saying they want schools, jobs and security. And, in a country where most of the people live in rural areas, their turnout could be a deciding factor.

But there remain plenty of undecided voters like 26-year-old Ferdinand Vertis. "They all come with great talk but then they have nothing to back it up," he said.

Meanwhile, in a dusty hamlet north of the western port town of Gonaives, Ormise Zephiren, 75, said she will walk the two miles to the schoolhouse where she's been assigned to vote.

Zephiren is used to the trek. And nothing about her life is easy. She lives in a hut made of mud and dried leaves and sustains on corn and mangoes she grows herself. But the land is becoming ever less fruitful as deforestation strips it of topsoil.

She says that she and her neighbors don't even know which candidates will help peasants the most. Like roughly half the population, they are illiterate.

Herald staff writer Trenton Daniel in Gonaives and Joe Mozingo in Port-au-Prince contributed to this report.

**Quiet but Not Necessarily Calm in Haiti
On Eve of Election, Fear of Violence Remains Palpable
By Manuel Roig-Franzia
Washington Post Foreign Service
Tuesday, February 7, 2006**

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, Feb. 6 -- Bullet holes, wide and deep and ugly, scar countless cinder-block shacks in Cite Soleil, this city's staggering seaside slum.

The gashes left by automatic weapons embody the darkest possibilities if things go badly here Tuesday when Haiti, after months of postponements, holds a presidential election on the 20th anniversary of the flight to exile of the notorious dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. The relative calm over the past few days in Cite Soleil, scene of frequent heavy-weapons shootouts between gangs and U.N. peacekeepers, has done little to assuage fears.

Haitians wait in the town of Gonaives to receive their identification for voting in the presidential election, the first since Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted two years ago. (Photos By Daniel Aguilar -- Reuters)

HAITI'S STRUGGLE

"We are living in an outlaw country," said Paul Arthur Fleurival, a U.S.-educated former presidential candidate. "No one respects the law."

More than 30 candidates are vying to lead what Larry Birns of the Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs calls a virtually "ungovernable" nation, ever at risk of turning into something resembling "Somalia under the warlords." The challenges awaiting the new president are breathtaking: More than 80 percent of Haitians live in poverty; kidnapping -- both of the wealthy and the lower classes -- is rampant; one in 20 people has HIV; violent gangs rule the Port-au-Prince slums and have rendered a major national highway inaccessible because of constant carjackings. Haiti is so poor -- the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere -- that its annual budget to sustain a population of more than 8 million is just one-fifth the size of Montgomery County's in Maryland.

Banners urging residents to " votez " -- vote -- now drape across Port-au-Prince's narrow, pocked streets, where the locals often can count the number of functioning stoplights on one hand. Political boosters -- urged on by more than 100 competing parties -- spray-paint their candidates' names on walls when they run out of fliers.

The leading candidate appears to be former president Rene Preval, who holds a rare distinction in a coup-prone nation: He is the only Haitian president to complete a full term in office, from 1996 to 2001. Preval is the favorite of Haiti's poor, benefiting from his legacy as a co-founder with Jean-Bertrand Aristide of the political party Lavalas, which means "cleansing flood" in Creole.

Preval served as prime minister to Aristide, a popular former Roman Catholic priest who became president in February 1991 and was overthrown after seven months; Preval followed him into exile. Aristide returned three years later, with U.S. military help, to finish his term. Aristide then succeeded

Preval as president in 2001, but resigned and was flown into exile by the United States in 2004 after rebels seized control of Port-au-Prince.

Preval, a soft-spoken 63-year-old agronomist who is sometimes called "Aristide's twin," does not inspire the same passions in the streets as his former ally, nor does he share Aristide's gift for fiery political rhetoric. Still, young men walk through Cite Soleil wearing bright yellow do-rags bearing Preval's white-bearded image and talk of their hopes that Preval could bring Aristide back from exile in South Africa.

"They kidnapped Aristide," Ronald Mombrin, a 26-year-old who scrapes by on odd jobs, said during a political rally in Cite Soleil. "If they take Preval, we don't care if they come after us -- as we die, the country will be burned."

Preval, who associates say has not spoken with Aristide in years, recently formed his own political party, Lespwa, which means "hope" in Creole.

Ira Kurzban, a lawyer who has represented Aristide, says the former president has told him in phone conversations that it would be impossible to have a fair election in Haiti while the nation is holding what he estimates are more than 700 political prisoners and forcing others into exile. Kurzban said he suspects that the U.S. government would support another candidate if Preval fails to collect 50 percent of the vote Tuesday and is forced into a runoff on March 19.

Class issues may define the contest to wrest Preval from the top spot. Preval, who is credited with building schools in poor areas and improving social services while he was president, is getting his strongest challenge from Charles Henri Baker, a businessman favored by Haiti's entrenched elite. Baker, who has campaigned with pledges to take a tough stance on crime, has tried to connect with voters by using the nickname "Charlito."

A former president -- Leslie Manigat, who was deposed by a coup in 1988 after less than four months in office -- is also considered a leading candidate. Among the others capable of taking votes from the front-runners are candidates with florid résumés, such as Guy Philippe, the brash leader of the rebel forces who toppled Aristide.

Hoping to avert the fraud charges that plagued the 2000 election, thousands of poll watchers sponsored by international groups will spread among 800 polling places. Helicopters will transport ballots from rural areas, and laminated tally sheets will replace easily altered handwritten documents, though official results are not expected for two or three days.

"This election is a turning point for democracy in Haiti," said Felix Ulloa of the Washington-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, which is monitoring the election. "In 2000, it was a mess."

Yet, there is still great discontent about the lack of absentee ballot provisions, effectively excluding half a million Haitians in the United States from voting unless they fly to Port-au-Prince. Because of security concerns, there will be less than half as many polling places as in 2000, and there have been

reports that some rural voters will have to walk six hours to cast ballots. And there will be no polling places in Cite Soleil, a bedrock of Preval support.

"If I am not going to put my life in danger, I cannot ask a member of the [Haitian election commission] to do so," Jacques Bernard, the commission's director general, when asked about Cite Soleil at an election eve news conference.

But leaders in the slum -- including a charismatic, 24-year-old gang boss known as T. Blan, who carries journalists' business cards in a worn Bible -- have vowed to lead a mass exodus on foot on election day.

T. Blan may get wet. Rain is forecast, promising that election day in Haiti -- at the very least -- could be muddy.

Exiled Aristide Still Affects Haiti Voters

By GINGER THOMPSON

New York Times

February 6, 2006

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, Feb. 5 — As Haitians prepared over the weekend to pick a new president, it sounded as if Rose Laporte was going to vote for an old one.

A René Préval supporter proclaimed her loyalties on Saturday in the capital, Port-au-Prince.

"For 200 years we were hungry," Ms. Laporte, the 37-year-old mother of two, said during a political rally on Saturday. "Then we had a chance with President Aristide, but they kidnapped him. We want him back."

On Tuesday this nation crippled by crime, torn by hostilities among the rich and poor, and plundered by decades of corrupt government is scheduled to hold the first of two rounds of national elections, to try again to lift itself up from ruin. Yet there are signs that the country may only be going in political circles.

Two years after an armed uprising ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who is living in exile in South Africa, he remains a galvanizing force both among the poor masses who brought him to power and the minority elite who conspired against him.

There is still outrage among his backers about the removal of the man who portrayed himself as a champion of the downtrodden in slums like Cité Soleil and Bel-Air, and anger at American involvement in his removal.

There is also unrelenting hostility toward Mr. Aristide in hillside suburbs, like Petionville, where well-to-do residents attribute a plague of kidnappings and killings to street gangs, known as "chimères," or "ghosts," who are believed to have been armed by Mr. Aristide during his presidency.

Those tensions overshadow political discourse. Members of several camps lament that there are more candidates for president — 32 men and 1 woman — than there are clear proposals for rebuilding this country, widely described as a failed state.

Campaigns have been dominated by catchy jingles, drunken political rallies and the same hostile language that has pushed Haiti over and over in the past decade to the brink of civil war. Further, while election officials promise a secure and open election, it remains unclear whether the losers will peacefully accept defeat.

Polls indicate that the leading candidate is René Préval, a 63-year-old agronomist who entered politics in 1990 as prime minister to President Aristide and who is widely considered to have been his protégé and the heir to his support among the poor. Mr. Préval was elected president in 1995 and is the only president in this country's recent history to finish a full five-year term and peacefully hand over power.

In a December Gallup poll sponsored by the United States government, 37 percent of voters polled supported Mr. Préval. But some political analysts predict that he could win more than 50 percent of the votes, and thus the presidency, in the first round.

In order to build trust among the middle classes and elite, Mr. Préval has tried in a weekend blitz of television and radio interviews to put a careful distance between himself and Mr. Aristide, who was accused by his opponents of corruption and of fostering violence. But Mr. Préval has also been careful not to alienate his base of support.

When asked in an interview last month, whether, if elected, he would bring Mr. Aristide back to Haiti, Mr. Préval said that the Constitution did not allow for the permanent banishment of any Haitian. However, he also made clear he would not stand in the way of investigations into charges against Mr. Aristide's government.

The question of Mr. Aristide's return "can only be answered by him," Mr. Préval said at that time. "It is for him to assess this situation."

In the days leading up to the elections, there have been no major outbreaks of violence in tough neighborhoods like Cité Soleil, giving residents some welcome relief from weeks of gunfights between street thugs and United Nations peacekeepers. Still, political rumblings go on.

Mr. Préval did not attend closing rallies in the capital, fearing outbreaks of disorder among his supporters or attacks by his opponents. Instead, the slight, soft-spoken candidate left the city without fanfare on Sunday morning for his father's hometown, Marmelade, and made his final campaign appearance in the comfort of friends, who welcomed him like family.

"From what I heard on the radio all day, with the prospect of Préval being president, the elite is already lining up and getting ready to derail him and keep him from governing," said Dumarsais Siméus, a former candidate for president who was forced to drop out of the race because he is an American citizen.

Mr. Siméus said: "If Préval is elected, he needs to reach out quickly and have members of the elite as advisers and in his government. He's got to make a pledge that this government is for everyone."

Almost none of the candidates running for office are new to the political scene. Among them are some elder statesmen, Leslie F. Manigat, 75, who served as president for four months in 1988 before he was overthrown by a military coup, and Marc L. Bazin, 73, sometimes called a chameleon because he has served in nearly every government since that of Jean-Claude Duvalier, known as Baby Doc.

Mr. Bazin served as prime minister under the military government that forced Mr. Aristide from power during his first term as president in 1993. This time around, he tried unsuccessfully to assume the leadership of Mr. Aristide's Lavalas party.

At a campaign event for Mr. Manigat, Clélie Cauvin, a chemist, said she was very close to supporting him, but worried about his calls for "forgiveness."

"There is already too much impunity in this country," said Ms. Cauvin, a mother of four. "We need justice, and punishment for people who commit crimes."

Former military and police officers are running for president, including Dany Toussaint, a former bodyguard to Mr. Aristide who has been linked by human rights groups to the political assassination of a popular Haitian journalist; and Guy Philippe, who led the rebellion against Mr. Aristide and who has been investigated by the United States government for suspected drug trafficking.

Charles Henri Baker, a 50-year-old garment factory owner, and a leader of the so-called bourgeoisie businessmen who financed the protests that helped topple President Aristide, was running a distant second to Mr. Préval in the December poll, supported by 10 percent of those polled.

As the only white Haitian running for office, the plain-talking Mr. Baker has struggled to prove that he is sympathetic to the struggles of the poor, winning support of the country's main farmers' union by promising to invest heavily in agriculture. At nearly every campaign rally, he addresses questions of race.

"People are saying that Charlito Baker is prejudiced," Mr. Baker said at his closing rally attended by some 300 people last Saturday. "If they say I am prejudiced against chimères, they are right. If they say I am prejudiced against rapists and assassins, they are right. But I am not prejudiced against anyone else."

Then Mr. Baker repeated his campaign slogan, "Everyone is welcome on this bus."

Not far away, an estimated 1,000 people danced from Bel-Air to the city's main plaza in support of Mr. Préval, following the music that blared from stadium-size speakers that were loaded on the backs of a caravan of trucks. In an instant, one of the city's toughest neighborhoods was transformed into a carnival.

No one seemed to care that their candidate was not there. Ms. Laporte, the mother of two at the rally, said: "I trust he knows what we want. We want jobs, and schools and security. We want to live with dignity again."

That is not all they wanted, however.

"I'm voting for Aristide to return to this country," said Barnabe Marvil, a high school graduate and aspiring doctor, dancing beneath a banner with Mr. Aristide's nickname, Titid, a Creole diminutive of Aristide. Later, another group from the rally sang old Aristide campaign songs, and chanted, "Aristide and Préval are twins."

"We're voting for Préval," Mr. Marvil said. "He'll bring Aristide back."

Hope and Haiti
TIM MORSON
Letter to the Editor
The Globe and Mail, Canada
February 8, 2006

Montreal -- Resurrection is of the supernatural order, a miracle that comes after death (Resurrecting Haiti -- Feb. 7). Unfortunately, history is filled with examples of nature's indifference to the fate of societies, and Haiti is no exception. Miracles simply do not exist in the realm of human affairs.

How do you create a "real democracy" in a country bereft of economic resources and where all classes are embroiled in a bitter struggle for simple survival? I doubt that hope will be enough, let alone elections.

The hopes of Haiti's poor have been dashed repeatedly by their leaders, the international community and other purveyors of dreams who have betrayed their promises.

Hope will keep some from despair but it will never be sufficient to build a society.

Resurrecting Haiti
The Globe and Mail, Canada
February 6, 2006

Canada has invested a great deal in the herculean task of transforming Haiti from a failed nation-state into a functioning democracy capable of protecting its long-suffering citizens and meeting their most basic economic, health and education needs. The next important milestone on this obstacle-strewn road comes today when Haitians go to the polls for the first time since the toppling of then-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide by armed rebellion in 2004. After the election comes the hard work of nation-building. It is vital for Haiti and for the entire hemisphere that this work be completed successfully, after two decades of dismal failure.

In its current disintegrated state, Haiti is a threat to the security of the entire region. It has turned into a haven for criminal gangs trafficking in weapons and drugs and has become a prime source of economic refugees seeking to escape the grinding poverty, disease and lawlessness of their homeland. The international community has waded into Haiti before, only to leave at the earliest opportunity. Haitians were left to fend for themselves, with predictably grim results. This time, the foreign intervention must be maintained until the job is done, no matter how long it takes.

For its part, Canada has pledged \$180-million in aid over two years. To help replace the rule of the gun with the rule of law, Canada has deployed 125 police officers as part of the 9,000-member United Nations Stabilization Mission and is assisting in building a modern judicial system. It has also provided electoral advice through Elections Canada. And more than a third of the 300 international observers who will be monitoring the vote are Canadian. Yet no matter how fair the voting is, there is no guarantee that Haiti will end up with a government willing and able to tackle endemic corruption, build an economy, disarm the gangs of thugs who control the slums, and install essential infrastructure in a country that has precious little of anything. Indeed, Haiti's record does not inspire confidence.

Since Jean-Claude Duvalier, known as Baby Doc, fled Haiti exactly two decades ago, ending 30 years of brutal dictatorship under the Duvalier family, the country has held four elections. Only one of them was regarded by outside monitors as fair, and none of them resulted in a system in which the politicians answer to the electorate and power regularly changes hands peacefully -- both hallmarks of democracy. Of the 33 candidates vying for the presidency in this election, the favourite in the polls is René Préval, once a close ally of Mr. Aristide and president himself from 1996 to 2001, between Mr. Aristide's two terms. He carries considerable baggage. In particular, he draws support from the criminals who terrorize Cité Soleil and other shantytowns, and he has long been viewed as a surrogate for the exiled Mr. Aristide. Even his supporters question whether Mr. Préval will have the ability or desire to disarm the marauding gangs who have brazenly kidnapped and murdered people in broad daylight and attacked UN peacekeepers. He has already ruled out military intervention as an option.

But regardless of the outcome, the international community cannot afford to throw up its hands in despair and abandon efforts to build the political, judicial and other public institutions necessary for democracy to take root and thrive. The landscape is harsh, but the long-oppressed Haitian people remain hopeful. Real democracy is within their grasp, and with it will eventually come a more stable, safer country, which is in everyone's interest.

UN troops deployed in chaotic Haiti election
SABC news, South Africa
Feb. 7, 2006

The clear election favourite is Rene Preval, a former president and an Aristide protege

UN troops fanned out across Haiti yesterday, some with mules carrying ballots up mountain tracks, for the first election since Jean-Bertrand Aristide was toppled as president in a rebellion two years ago.

Despite rampant crime, fears of election day violence or fraud and the protests of some who will have to walk miles to vote, the United Nations predicted voting would be peaceful.

"Violence so far has not been used as a political instrument. Let's hope they will not use violence against the elections," said Gerard Le Chevallier, the top UN election official in Haiti.

The clear election favourite is Rene Preval, a former president and an Aristide protege who draws broad support in poor slums but is mistrusted by Haiti's small business elite and former officers in its disbanded army.

Preval history could allow Aristide's return

A Preval victory could allow Aristide to return to Haiti and might irk Washington, which accused the priest-turned-president of despotism before he was ousted.

UN trucks ferried ballot papers to voting stations around the country yesterday and about 180 mules were deployed to reach remote areas.

In the small town of La Digue, about 40km northwest of the capital, 4 000 election ballots and boxes containing ballot boxes, crayons, elastic bands, toilet paper and candles were loaded onto four mules and sent on a six-hour journey to the remote village of Michel. Ten UN soldiers joined them on the narrow, rocky path. "They will protect the ballots," said Arturo Merello, Uruguayan Army Major.

The mules, hired at about \$23 a day each, bore makeshift wooden saddles and saddlebags fashioned from old flour sacks into which the supplies were loaded. Cardboard boxes carrying the ballots were piled on top.

UN troops to stand guard

UN troops will stand guard at some voting centers to prevent a repeat of an election day massacre in 1987, when thugs killed more than 30 people in one of the bloodiest single episodes of Haiti's long search for a stable democracy.

The election today is the latest of many efforts to build democracy in Haiti, in chaos after decades of political violence, crushing poverty and crime. Almost 2 000 people have been kidnapped for ransom just in the past year. The voting comes exactly 20 years after dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier was ousted. Since then, Aristide has dominated Haiti's politics.

He was twice elected president but was unable to finish either term before his foes toppled him. He was finally forced into exile in February 2004 when a rag-tag rebellion of former allies and old

enemies marched on Port-au-Prince. Accused of corruption and repression, Aristide fled under pressure from the United States and France.

About 9 000 UN peacekeepers were then deployed to Haiti to stave off more violence and prepare the election. Serious logistic problems forced several postponements and, on the eve of voting, officials warned people in TV ads that some polling stations had been moved.

Many Haitians suspect the unelected interim government has tried to make voting difficult in the poorest areas to undermine Aristide's ally. "They don't want us to vote. They know we will support Preval so they try to stop us," said France Emma Michel, a 28-year-old woman in the sprawling slum of Cite Soleil, which has become a symbol of Haiti's misery in recent years.

Inability to put polling stations

Election authorities say they were unable to put polling stations inside Cite Soleil because it was too dangerous.

Armed gangs loyal to Aristide control the shantytown, use it to hide their kidnap-for-ransom victims and have held running battles with UN peacekeepers. In the countryside, armed groups of former soldiers hold sway. Many fear radicals on either side could launch new attacks if the election does not go their way.

Aristide remains in exile in South Africa and has kept a remarkably low profile in the run-up to today's vote. Preval was president between 1996 and 2001, the only elected Haitian leader to ever serve his full term and hand over power peacefully. He has a comfortable lead in opinion polls but needs to win at least 50 percent of the votes to avoid a run-off.

Running at least 20 percentage points behind Preval are wealthy industrialist Charles Baker, a white Haitian, and Leslie Manigat, the former president, who briefly led Haiti in 1988 before being overthrown in a military coup. Officials say it will take three days to count the results. - Reuters

Haiti crippled by crime, fear ahead of election

06 Feb 2006

Source: Reuters

By Kieran Murray

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, Feb 6 (Reuters) - First, one of Robert Labrousse's friends was shot dead and two of his employees were kidnapped as they left his factory. Then the slum gang moved in and stripped the business clean.

A truck smashed through the fence at his bleach and detergents factory near the Haitian capital's sprawling shantytown of Cite Soleil, and the looters quickly hauled away office equipment and 4,000-gallon (15,000-litre) tanks full of chemicals.

What they couldn't steal, they destroyed. Labrousse puts his losses at around \$1 million and says his more than 50 employees are now without jobs.

The attack late last month was part of a ferocious crime wave that has added to the misery of this nation, the poorest in the Americas, as it prepares for an election on Tuesday.

"Every year, people say it cannot get any worse, that we've reached rock bottom. And every day it gets worse," said Labrousse, a mild mannered and politically moderate 64-year-old. "No one gets arrested for anything. They live in impunity."

Almost 2,000 people have been kidnapped for ransom over the past year and hundreds killed since Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former firebrand priest, was ousted as president and forced into exile by a violent rebellion two years ago.

In a country crippled by a vast divide between rich and poor, the collapse of law is a major issue in the presidential election that is aimed at reviving democracy.

CLASS HATRED

Haiti's business elite, many of whom became rich during the Duvalier family dictatorship, blame Aristide. They accuse him of arming his slum supporters and teaching them class hatred.

"This is the fruit of what he preached. His philosophy got into the heads of the poor," said Labrousse, looking down over Port-au-Prince from a balcony up in the hills where the wealthy live behind high walls.

Down in Cite Soleil, gang leaders loyal to Aristide wield substantial political power and ransoms from kidnappings are one of the few sources of income. The poor also harbor deep mistrust toward the rich.

"If I kidnap one of those people who are killing us, who are responsible for our misery, I don't think it's a crime because when they kill us, they don't consider it a crime," said Alexandre Michel, a local gang member.

Aristide remains a hero in Cite Soleil and most people hope the election will allow him to return again. Anger runs high, directed at U.N. peacekeepers who regularly fight local gangs in running street battles, and at the rich.

"The bourgeoisie live up there, in their big houses. They don't care about us," said Marie Jean Baptiste, a 26-year-old mother of two. "Aristide gave us work and food, but the rich don't want to share."

Business leaders and some prominent presidential candidates want U.N. troops to force their way into Cite Soleil and arrest the slum lords, but front-runner Rene Preval, a former president and Aristide protege, insists it will not work.

He says peace can only be restored with a mix of policing and social programs, building schools and providing jobs.

"That is also part of security -- disarming the children and putting a book in their hands," said Preval, who has tried to distance himself from Aristide in recent years and is promising to work with business leaders if elected.

Many fear more violence after the election, sealing Haiti's reputation as a failed nation unable to forge stable democracy after Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier was toppled in 1986.

Labrousse said things are so bad, even the Duvalier era of repressive rule looks good in comparison.

"If people are allowed to do whatever they want, this country will go down the drain." (Additional reporting by Joseph Guyler Delva)

ELECTIONS AMID CHAOS
Haiti Is at the End of the World
By Jens Glüsing
Spiegel Online, Germany
Feb. 6, 2006

Haiti's presidential election on Tuesday is meant to signal a new beginning for the strife-torn Caribbean nation. But neither the poll nor a large contingent of UN peacekeepers appear likely to stem the widespread gang violence threatening to pitch the impoverished country deeper into chaos.

REUTERS

The vast majority of Haitians live in abject poverty.

As Father Pierre Lephene stepped onto the street he suddenly felt the barrel of a gun pressed into the nape of his neck. "Get in the car or we'll blow your head off," threatened one of three men, who pushed him into a delivery van and sped off to Cité Soleil, a notorious slum in Haiti's crime-ridden capital, Port-au-Prince.

The kidnappers then demanded a \$300,000 ransom from the Catholic Church for Father Lephene's release, but eventually agreed to let him go for \$10,000. A day later Lephene was set free, but his kidnappers even had him drive himself out of the dangerous slum.

As he made his way toward some Jordanian United Nations peacekeepers stationed on the edge of Cité Soleil in an armored vehicle, Lephene flashed the car's lights and honked his horn. But the soldiers didn't react, which isn't surprising considering that the gangs in Haiti are better armed than the UN's so-called blue helmets.

Father Lephene's story is unfortunately anything but unique in the Western Hemisphere's poorest country. Founded by freed slaves in 1804 to become the world's first republic governed by blacks, Haiti's democracy has struggled with increasing chaos in recent years. Tuesday's election is meant to signal a fresh start following the violent ouster of the country's last elected leader, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, two years ago.

Around 9,000 UN peacekeepers have been stationed in Haiti since June 2004 under the auspices of the world body's MINUSTAH mission, which is meant to stabilize the fragile 8.5-million strong country that occupies half of the Caribbean island Hispaniola. But the UN forces have been unable to stem the violence and anarchy that continue push many Haitians further into despair and misery.

Poll offers little hope

Few here believe anything will change after this week's presidential and parliamentary poll, which has been delayed four times. International interventions into Haiti's affairs have failed before. The United States helped return Aristide to power with military force 12 years ago. Back then the former priest was considered the nation's savior. But he quickly turned out to be less of a godsend for Haiti's impoverished masses. He became willing to use gangs of armed thugs known as "chimères" to shore up his political support and he is accused of transferring millions of dollars abroad.

An opposition alliance called the "Group of 184" forced Aristide into exile in South Africa two years ago. But before he left he organized the distribution of weapons among his supporters. Washington, which once helped him, now says his tenure was marked by despotism. But with its military priorities elsewhere around the world, the United States was happy to leave the messy business of sorting Haiti out for the most part to the United Nations.

The MINUSTAH mission is controlled by Latin American countries. A Chilean is in charge of the civilian side and militarily the soldiers stand under Brazilian command. The main foes of the peacekeepers are the criminal gangs that rule the slums and threaten the entire country with kidnappings, violence and drug trafficking. But the UN forces have proven both inept and ineffectual in dealing with them.

As soldiers stormed Cité Soleil in June, countless innocent bystanders died in a hail of bullets. One criminal leader was also killed, but another gangster, Amaral Duclona, merely took his place. His thugs have been campaigning for presidential candidate René Préval, who was once an Aristide protégée.

Préval favored to win

Préval is the favorite to win on Tuesday even though Haiti's elites consider him a marionette of the exiled Aristide. Préval, who already served once as president from 1996-2001 in between Aristide's two terms in office, rejects such accusations while still recruiting supporters from Aristide backers.

Préval appears set to carry Cité Soleil, which is controlled by 34 different gangs. The criminals have set up a vast infrastructure in the slum with some 200,000 residents. The area has dozens of huts that serve as cells for kidnapping victims from Port-au-Prince. Impoverished locals are also hired to feed and guard the prisoners.

Kidnappings are a daily occurrence in the Haitian capital. In December alone, at least 12 people were abducted each day -- officially, at least. The actual number is much higher. People from all sections of society are at risk: rich and poor, black and white, children, journalists, election helpers and foreigners. Victims such as Father Lephene are particularly prized since the Church is a reliable payer of ransoms.

His school for underprivileged street children is deep inside of the so-called "red zone," which is off limits for both UN personnel and diplomats because the danger of being abducted is so high. The neighborhood's streets are empty, and even the colorful "tap-taps" public buses avoid the area. Piles of trash and car wrecks litter the alleyways.

But the gangs no longer restrict their campaigns of terror to these parts of town. The entire city has become dangerous -- the harbor is a no-go area, Port-au-Prince's main boulevards are plagued by bandits and even the region surrounding the airport is controlled by gangsters. An estimated 200,000 firearms are in circulation in the country.

"The UN soldiers should have started disarming the bandits much earlier," says André Apaid, a rich businessman and spokesman of the opposition.

But UN officials contend that any military operation in the overpopulated slums would needlessly endanger the lives of innocents. And so the blue helmets stand between the fronts, despised by the poor as foreign occupiers and scorned by the rich as "tourists" unwilling to get their hands dirty. The suicide of the commanding Brazilian officer four weeks ago naturally hasn't helped moral any.

"MINUSTAH is under horrible stress," one Brazilian soldier wrote to his family back home.

"Mutilated corpses lie in the streets for days and dogs and pigs eat the cadavers. Haiti is the end of the world."

UN ineffective against chaos

A man runs past a fire on the streets of Port-au-Prince, Haiti during unrest in 2004 following Aristide's ouster.

The furthest outpost for the Brazilian troops is a deserted ice factory on the edge of the deteriorated quarter Cité Militaire. Not much farther begins the slum Cité Soleil, which is ostensibly under the control of Jordanian peacekeepers, which make up the largest contingent of MINUSTAH soldiers. The Arabs are at least partially blamed -- at least internally by UN officials -- for the chaos in the gangster hotbed. Most of the Jordanians speak only Arabic and they avoid all contact with the local population.

"We are dealing with troops from the Middle East and Asia," complains acting Haitian Prime Minister Gérard Latortue. "They are completely lost -- some big time crook could walk right under their noses completely unchallenged."

Latortue, a large man with a shambling walk, has led the interim government for the past two years. But the strongest figure on the island has been the Chilean UN official Juan Gabriel Valdés. He tries to spread the unrealistic optimism that Haiti will soon be able to stand on its own after the election. The nations that supply forces for MINUSTAH would like to bring their troops home, but the peacekeepers could conceivably be needed in the country for years to come if the small amount of stability left is to be preserved.

"We need more troops badly," says Latortue, a former businessman who used to live in Miami. But even if the UN troops stay, he has had enough of his chaotic homeland. "As soon as the new president is in office, I'm going back to Florida," he says.

**Haiti's election will have an impact on South Florida
Voters to choose president from a long list of contenders**

By Tim Collie

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

February 5 2006

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- Almost two years after a brutal rebellion toppled their last elected president, Haitians are set to select a new leader Tuesday from a slate that includes many figures from the past two decades of political turmoil.

"It's the same old cast of characters, but whoever wins is going to inherit a country that's a social, political and economic disaster," said Yves Dorestal, a dean at Haiti's national university. "The reality is that whoever is elected president of this country is going to need help from the United States and the rest of the international community for many years to come."

The outcome of the election will directly affect South Florida, home to the largest Haitian exile community in the United States and the source of hundreds of millions of dollars sent from residents to their families on the island.

"South Florida will bear the first brunt of whatever goes wrong or right with these elections," said Robert Fatton, a Haiti expert and political science professor at the University of Virginia.

"If things go well and a new government can turn Haiti around, then it will be an important source of trade and tourism with the country," said Fatton. "But this country has already had plenty of elections, and if it doesn't turn around soon, I think you're looking at a catastrophe that would touch the politics and trade" of the Caribbean region.

The United States, the country's largest donor, has spent \$196 million over the past year in Haiti in economic development and assistance to hold the elections, which have been canceled four times because of factional squabbling, misplaced resources, and poor planning.

That's a pittance of the billions needed to rebuild the country, diplomats here say. But if an effective government doesn't take control soon, Haiti could drift into a civil war that many leaders here fear would send tens of thousands of its 8.3 million citizens onto boats heading for South Florida and neighboring Caribbean countries.

Since Aristide fled the country on Feb. 29, 2004, an unelected provisional government led by former Boca Raton resident Gerard Latortue has been running Haiti, backed by an 8,900-man U.N. force, known by its French acronym of MINUSTAH.

The peacekeeping force has bogged down in a gang war in the slums of Haiti's capital, and a soaring crime wave has crippled promised economic and political reform. The city's ports have collapsed from crumbling infrastructure and the violence, and few goods are moving in or out of the country.

"I'm graduating students here every year who for all practical purposes have no jobs waiting for them, and no real future in this country," said Dorestal, who oversees thousands of students enrolled in fields

like psychology and social work. "They typically find some piecemeal work here in the city, or head back to homes in the countryside where they just become angrier and more militant. And these are among the best this country has to offer."

Some 80 percent of the country's population live on less than a dollar a day in villages on the country's denuded mountainsides, eroding farmlands and urban slums. Lifespans have steadily fallen over the past two decades to under age 50, many medical experts say, because of an unchecked AIDS epidemic, tuberculosis and other treatable diseases that kill tens of thousands annually.

Despite these hardships, almost 80 percent of the country's estimated 4.5 million adults have registered to vote, one of the highest registration rates in the world, elections experts say.

"My vote is my life, it's the only way I have a chance to change things here and get rid of MINUSTAH," said Sonitane Paul, 38, a street vendor and mother of 10 in Cité Soleil, the seaside slum in Haiti's capital where U.N. troops have waged near-daily battles with drug and kidnapping gangs.

"The rich here think that we are no good, but there are more of us than them, and it's this vote that helps, us," said Paul, as she stood at a protest last week calling for polling centers to be put in the slum where some 300,000 people live. Fearful of violence, election officials plan to place voting booths in heavily protected areas just outside Cité Soleil.

On top of violence, authorities fear technical problems at the polls. About 400,000 voter cards have not been picked up, and there's been confusion among many citizens about where they should vote. The 804 polling places being established are far fewer than previous elections, meaning some Haitians will have to walk miles to make their voices heard.

"It's not going to be a perfect election -- everyone knows that -- but it will be a fair one," said Pierre Richard Duchemin, a member of Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council. "We've been pregnant a long time, and it's been a problem pregnancy, but on Tuesday, Haiti's going to finally give birth."

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Hope appears elusive as desperate Haiti prepares for national elections

AP

The Jamaica Observer

Sunday, February 05, 2006

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) - A rusty pick-up carrying two wounded young men speeds through a slum as a paramedic sticks a barely audible siren out a window, hurtling past scrap-metal shacks and the same blue-helmeted UN troops who allegedly shot the men.

The makeshift ambulance, its Red Cross flag flapping, is just one snapshot of the horrendous conditions and failing international support in Haiti as the desperate country prepares for Tuesday's long-delayed elections to replace a weak interim government.

Conditions are going from very bad to even worse for the 8.3 million people in one of the world's poorest countries. An estimated 80 per cent of Haitians don't have jobs. Kidnapping for ransom might be the only growth industry. Rich and poor view each other with suspicion and loathing. Hope appears as wispy as the smoke from burning garbage that permeates the capital.

Haiti's problems have deepened profoundly since the February 2004 rebellion that ousted elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was accused of corruption and of using thugs to attack his opponents.

Tuesday's voting is seen as crucial to pulling Haiti from its poverty and despair. High turnout and the installation of a legitimate government could increase stability, encouraging rich nations to pour more money into aid and development.

But with 33 candidates - from a former president to an ex-rebel commander - running for president and dozens of parties vying for 129 legislative seats, it's unlikely anyone will be able to claim a mandate to form a cohesive government.

Many fear Haiti is nearing a point of no return.

"If we do not stop the decay of institutions and we do not support a legitimate government, we could come to a situation in which a total collapse is possible," Juan Gabriel Valdes, the United Nations' special envoy to Haiti, told The Associated Press. "The international community cannot allow that to happen."

Life expectancy for Haitians is 52 years. For those lucky enough to have a job, the average wage is US\$1.07 (euro.89) a day. Half the people can't read or write.

In the capital's sprawling Cite Soleil slum, gangs are on a kidnapping spree, snatching up ordinary Haitians, foreign missionaries and international election workers.

Haitians blame a multitude of suspects. The poor accuse the rich of paying gangs to carry out kidnappings. Some say Aristide is orchestrating the kidnappings from exile in South Africa. The rich complain that the United Nations hasn't stepped in firmly.

In a rare interview, a gang leader implicated a local police commander.

Wearing designer sunglasses with his Che Guevara T-shirt and black jeans, "Toutou" - "Dog" in Haitian Creole - said he knows many policemen because he used to be one. While denying personal involvement, Toutou alleged police arm gangs to carry out kidnappings and then intercept ransom payments.

National Police Chief Mario Andresol acknowledged problems in the police. "About a quarter of the force is involved in corruption, kidnappings or even arms trafficking," he said.

Georges Sassin, a wealthy owner of a textile factory, hopes the election will calm Haiti. If not, he plans to join others who have closed up shop and fled. Only 15 business owners still operate assembly plants in Haiti, down from more than 100 in the late 1990s. At least 6,000 jobs have disappeared in the last year alone, he said.

"If elections happen and a majority of voters go down and vote, then I'm optimistic," Sassin said. "But if the contrary happens, I'm already planning on packing up and leaving."

Sassin, whose wife recently lost a cousin to gunfire, says UN troops should do more to crack down on gangs. "There is a lot of frustration because we see the presence of all that military might, and nothing is being done to prevent bad things happening to people," he said.

The peacekeepers, fearing widespread civilian casualties, have refrained from making a large-scale assault on the Cite Soleil gangs. Election organisers decided not to put voting booths in the slum, citing the lack of security.

Even the peacekeepers' limited presence in Cite Soleil is problematic. Nine peacekeepers have been killed since the force arrived in June 2004. Slum residents are often caught in the crossfire.

Last Wednesday, George Alain Colbert, an 18-year-old shoe shiner, was on a main Cite Soleil road when a UN armoured personnel carrier appeared in the distance. A burst of gunfire erupted from its machine gun. Colbert fell, part of his heel blown away. Another bullet hit him in the testicles. A second man was wounded in the chest.

Neighbours and relatives carried them into a nearby alley and wept as the Red Cross medics rushed to the scene.

"He only had a shoeshine box," one sobbing woman yelled over and over.

There were no peacekeepers around to hear her anguished words. But later that day, hundreds of people marched past a UN fort in Cite Soleil. Some made obscene gestures at the Jordanian soldiers inside.

Brazilian Lt Gen Jose Elito Carvalho de Siqueira, the new UN commander, said the troops only fire when attacked.

"They have strict orders not to shoot without identifying the problem. But we need to return fire sometimes to control the situation," he said.

Speaking on the patio of his guarded suburban villa, Valdes, the UN envoy, said wealthy countries must come through with promised aid to rebuild Haiti's crumbled infrastructure and fund social projects. If not, he worries Latin American countries might withdraw peacekeepers.

"There would be no reason to stay here if the only role that is assigned to the Latin American troops is the role of a policeman of a situation that continues to deteriorate," he said.

Petition Filed Against US as Haiti Approaches Elections
San Francisco Bay Area Indymedia
by Ben Terrall
Monday, Feb. 06, 2006 at 10:57 AM

As Haiti's long-postponed Presidential election is slated to take place February 7, the mainstream media is covering ongoing violence in the Caribbean nation with a characteristic lack of attention to context and essential history.

Wire service coverage especially has had a tendency to discuss violence in Haiti as if it exists in a vacuum, with little insight into why people in the poorest neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince are defending themselves against incursions by the police and UN troops.

Almost no analysis touches on why UN "peacekeepers" were sent to provide legitimacy for a coup regime that seized power on Feb. 29, 2004, nor has there been much mention of the crucial role the Bush Administration played in backing a motley collection of sweatshop owners, death squad veterans and assorted rightists who forced the democratically-elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide from office.

A good example is a February 5 AP piece which quotes US Ambassador Tim Carey saying, "The future of Haiti is at stake. It's long past time that Haiti move into the modern world." The article says that Aristide "fled amid an uprising in February 2004," but nowhere mentions the US role in his ouster.

Partly in order to inject some of that crucial history into the limited media discussion of Haiti's elections, the US-based Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux in Port-au-Prince, Yale Law School and Transafrica Forum this week filed a petition with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights against the U.S., Haiti, and the Dominican Republic on behalf of Haitians victimized by the current coup regime[http://www.ijdh.org/articles/article_iachr_BAI_IJDH_Yale.htm].

This legal initiative has garnered little mainstream attention, with the Miami Herald dismissively describing it as "Largely repeating allegations made by Aristide supporters in the past." But it is an important step in keeping alive the awful truth of the Bush Administration's "other regime change" (actually, since the ousted government was elected by an overwhelming majority, it was much more of a representative democracy than the regime in Washington). The petition is also a well-sourced, thorough resource for more independent-minded journalists and activists.

As Maxine Waters said in a statement supporting the petition, "two years later, the tragic results of regime change in Haiti are clear. Haiti is in total chaos. The unelected interim government, which was put in power by the United States and has received unprecedented support from our government, is both oppressive and incompetent. Violence is widespread, and security is non-existent. The Haitian police have been implicated in extrajudicial executions, and the interim government has imprisoned hundreds of political prisoners without trial. Haitian elections, which are now scheduled for next Tuesday, have been postponed several times, are fraught with technical problems, and are unlikely to be free and fair."

Waters called on the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights “to investigate the coup d’etat that occurred on February 29, 2004, and determine the role of the Bush Administration in this travesty of justice, which denied the democratic rights of the people of Haiti.”

Slum-dwellers on edge as Haiti vote nears

By JASON MOTLAGH

UPI

Feb. 6, 2006

CITE SOLEIL, Haiti, Feb. 6 (UPI) -- Residents of one of the most dangerous slums in the Americas fear violence beyond its reaches and bemoan the long distances they must walk to vote Tuesday in Haiti's crucial presidential election.

United Nations and elections officials have pledged maximum security at more than 800 voting stations nationwide, calling on 3.5 million eligible voters to cast their ballots and restore democracy after a rebellion ousted former priest-turned-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide two years ago.

But many of the poor in Cite Soleil -- a sprawling seaside warren of bullet-pocked cinderblock and scrap metal hovels at the fringe of the capital, Port-au-Prince -- are convinced Haiti's business elite will incite election-day violence and have tried to deter them by making voting stations less accessible.

"People are angry and scared that they can not vote here," said Patrick Tentulien, 26, an unemployed local activist who wants to start a grassroots aid organization in Soleil 19, one of the slum's bleakest corners.

"We will have to walk a long way to go vote and anything could happen," he said, as naked children and pigs mingled nearby in rancid sewage.

Election officials have decided not to set up polls inside Cite Soleil on grounds that gang intimidation could affect voter turnout.

Some locals will therefore have to walk almost three miles to reach the nearest voting station, drawing criticism from observers who see the move as a deliberate attempt to hamstring the support-base of front-running candidate, Rene Preval, a one-time protégé of Aristide beloved by slum dwellers.

"The (opposition) strategy will be to freeze out as many Preval supporters as they can in the first round," said Robert McGuire, a Haiti specialist at Trinity College in Washington, D.C.

The Haitian Constitution mandates that presidential candidates must claim 50 percent of the first round vote to win outright, otherwise a run-off must be held.

"This is where you connect the dots in terms of not wanting the people in Cite Soleil to vote," McGuire said. "There's (200,000) more votes there that would potentially go to Preval. That's a huge bloc."

Hundreds have died in street violence and more than 2,000 kidnappings have occurred in the capital in the past year, say human rights watchdogs. An average of 12 people a day were abducted during the month of December.

Many victims have been stashed with families in the bowels of Cite Soleil, deemed "the deepest wound in Haiti's belly" by Juan Gabriel Valdes, U.N. envoy to Haiti.

Dozens of armed gangs infest the slums, where gun battles between rival groups and the blue-helmeted troops of the 9,000-strong U.N. stabilization force, known by its French acronym Minustah, are routine. Haitian police do not dare enter.

But "violence in Haiti does not only come from Cite Soleil," according to U.N. spokesman Damian Onses-Cardenas, a fact locals know all too well.

"We are worried about Minustah and the police, the elites," said Isamene Desamous, 44, wearing a hat stamped with Preval's image.

In tears, Desamous said that a relative was seized last week by police on bogus charges while running an errand outside the slum. She said they had demanded \$500 for his release -- a massive sum in a country where the average person earns less than a dollar a day and 80 percent of the population is unemployed.

Haiti is by far the poorest nation in the western hemisphere. The U.N. currently spends more than the government, and 50 percent of state revenue reportedly finds its way into the pockets of an elite 5 percent.

Police officers and members of the upper class with political and financial incentives to disrupt elections have been involved in criminal schemes where gang members are hired to carry out kidnappings.

National Police Chief Mario Andresol has admitted that up to a quarter of his ranks are corrupt, involved in kidnappings and arms trafficking.

But residents of Cite Soleil have developed a singular resentment of the U.N. peacekeepers assigned to root out gangs and establish law and order in their backyard "war zone."

"You've got a country without peace, flooded with weapons and all kinds of bad guys and spoilers... It's just an unenviable, impossible task," said McGuire.

Slum leaders and human rights groups cite a raft of instances where troops have fired indiscriminately from their patrol tanks, killing innocent civilians they were sent to protect.

"I heard shots and started to run ... they hit me two times in the back and I fell," said Cyril, who is recovering from gun shot wounds to his thigh and rectum at a hospital run by Medecins Sans Frontiers inside Cite Soleil.

The 29-year-old drink vendor said he did not see where the bullets came from, but was sure who pulled the trigger: "Minustah, Minustah," he whispered.

"They hate Minustah here," said Carlos Belloni, an Italian surgeon on duty. "They always say it was them, but we never really know."

Belloni pointed out a quarter-sized hole where a high-velocity round had ripped through metal shutters of its first floor pediatric care center, just missing young patients that were asleep.

"There is a big debate as to where that bullet came from," he said, adding that the pediatric unit had since been relocated below to avoid stray gunfire.

MSF doctors treated 103 shooting victims last month, 90 percent of them in the first three weeks alone. Since Jan. 20, however, they and U.N. officials say violence has been unusually low.

One Soleil 19 gang member, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that he and his friends planned to vote. Some gang leaders have said they would even accompany voters to the polls.

"We are ready to disarm and start working," he said, pistol resting on the table next to a game of dominos. "But things must change here in Cite Soleil first. We cannot keep living like animals ... (Minustah) needs to stop attacking us and ... that is why Preval must win."

Meanwhile, U.N. military officials, which have always said its soldiers only shoot when fired upon, have ceased ordering large-scale offensives into Cite Soleil, citing the potential for "collateral damage."

Nine peacekeepers have been killed since the \$584 million-a-year mission began in June 2004.

The U.N., for its part, increased patrols throughout Haiti over the weekend to ensure security leading up to the vote. Key checkpoints were reinforced while armored personnel carriers prowled the perimeters of major slums, stopping vehicles at random to search for weapons.

The new U.N. Commander, Brazilian Army Gen. Jose Elito Carvalho de Siquiera, said last week that rapid response forces with equipped with helicopter support will be ready to put down violent outbreaks in "5 or 10 minutes" before, during and after elections.

Haiti's unelected interim authorities have also closed schools and government offices for the entire week. They noted a 1987 massacre by thugs that began at a school and spilled into the streets, resulting in the deaths of 34 people and a scuttled ballot.

"As previous campaigns in Haiti show, the date draws nearer and the levels of violence by those who are convinced they won't win tends to escalate," said McGuire.

Preval cancelled a series of rallies over the weekend after receiving threats of attacks against his supporters.

But this will not stop Jullio Heransin, 22, and his Soleil 19 neighbors from showing up at the polls.

"We will mobilize en masse and go vote," said the would-be computer programmer. "The elections are our moment to express our frustrations... Preval is already President for us."

Haiti hopes for democratic boost
EuroNews.net, France
February 6, 2006

Haitians vote today in presidential and legislative elections that are hoped to be a first step out of rule by decree and a UN-aided interim administration. Rene Preval will get the biggest vote say opinion polls; the former president and close ally of exiled former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide gets support from the latter's electorate.

UN observers say this has been a noticeably peaceful election compared to past polls, but the second-placed challenger Charles Henry Baker welcomes EU monitors; one of no less than three groups overseeing the elections. There are now over nine thousand Brazilian-led UN soldiers and police trying to keep a lid on the simmering Caribbean island.

Although politics have calmed, on the street criminals are running riot, with up to 10 kidnappings a day since a sharp upswing in crime in the capital Port au Prince in the autumn. Political and gang violence has contributed to Haiti remaining one of the poorest countries in the world despite 200 years of independence. The UN is currently committing long-term to help solve the country's problems, but at least in the countryside the dangers of the capital seem far away. However the country's grinding poverty is not. At this clinic the effects of a poor medical system, poor diet, unemployment and disease are stark. Even if Haiti is often equated with chaos, less than 10 percent of around a billion euros in aid promised 18 months ago has been delivered. It is much needed, as is a straightforward election today.

Slum gangs rule as Haiti goes to polls
Tony Allen-Mills, in Port-au-Prince
The Sunday Times Online, UK
February 5, 2006

BEHIND the high stone walls of an abandoned brewery overlooking Haiti's most volatile slum, Lieutenant Commander Jorge Teixeira chewed his lip in frustration.

Teixeira had just finished explaining how Brazilian troops from the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti — known by its French acronym, Minustah — had established a military stronghold at the edge of a rancid seaside shantytown crawling with heavily armed gangsters.

The purge of the filthy alleys adjoining the Cité Soleil slum had supposedly proved so successful that Teixeira was keen to demonstrate that his men could patrol the area in open Jeeps without fear of coming under fire.

An exchange of gunshots across the road put the plan on hold, but worse was to come. A battered lorry appeared and dumped a mountain of stinking rubbish a few yards from the brewery gates, blocking access to the nearby main road.

Before they could give further chase to the gunmen, drug smugglers and kidnapers who have turned Cité Soleil into a lethal ghetto, the Brazilians had to deploy an armoured personnel carrier, specially equipped with a modified snow plough, to push the stomach-churning refuse aside.

“The gangsters pay the locals to pick up the mess and dump it on our doorstep,” said Teixeira sadly. A tactic that costs the enemy less than \$1 a lorryload had once again confounded an international peacemaking operation that will cost \$500m (£281m) this year.

Haiti is preparing for another forlorn stab at democracy in a chaotic presidential election which, after four postponements, will finally take place on Tuesday. But the low-tech cunning of the sinister slum landlords of Cité Soleil is proving more than a match for one of the most expensive international operations mounted by the UN.

In a desperate attempt to prevent the poorest country in the western hemisphere from collapsing into permanent anarchy — thereby creating a potentially poisonous failed state less than an hour's flying time from Miami — the UN is hurling resources at a Caribbean island riven by 200 years of tumult, bloodshed and squalor.

In the hills above Port-au-Prince neither the stink of the slums nor the sound of gunfire reaches the bougainvillea-draped balconies of the Montana hotel, where Haiti's business and political elite mingles with UN officials for cocktails that cost more than most Haitian families earn in a week.

It was on one of those marble-paved balconies last month that General Urano da Matta Bacellar, the Minustah military commander, shot himself in the head.

His officers believe that their Brazilian general's death was connected to domestic matters and not to despair at the way his military mission was going. Yet the peacekeeping task continues to be plagued by criticism of heavy-handed tactics by UN soldiers. Civilian casualties are mounting steadily as the battle for Cité Soleil turns into yet another acid test of the international community's ability to manufacture order from chaos.

Fritz Claude, a 46-year-old mechanic, walked out of his house in Cité Soleil last month to find Jordanian troops opening fire on a group of what he called les chimères — the ghostly gunmen of the alleys. Claude slammed his door shut, but a bullet smashed through a wall and lodged in his leg.

Next to him in a trauma ward was Jean Michelet Etienne, a 10-year-old who was walking down an alley when a bullet struck the back of his head, passing through his skull and exiting through his forehead. He lay in the hospital on Friday with his legs and left arm paralysed.

“We see too many children like this and their prospects in a country like Haiti are not good,” observed a member of the hospital's staff. “I've heard some of the doctors wondering if it might not be kinder just to let an infection take hold. But they know they can't let a boy die, no matter how difficult his life.”

Tough choices are commonplace in Haiti, where the average wage is \$1 a day, unemployment is about 80% and the UN spends more than the government, which cannot afford rubbish collection or pothole repairs in its \$380m annual budget.

UN troops arrived in June 2004 after an armed rebellion forced Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the former president, into exile. Once regarded as a Haitian saviour, Aristide, a former Roman Catholic priest, proved a bitter disappointment after disbanding the army and allowing criminal gangs a virtual free hand.

Following almost two years of ineffectual interim government, Haiti's next leader will be drawn from 33 candidates, including two former presidents, two suspected drug traffickers, a wealthy white businessman and a former colonel who once attempted a coup.

Opinion polls suggest one of the former presidents, René Préval — once a close associate of Aristide — is the favourite over Charles Henri Baker, the white industrialist who decided to run after learning that workers in his textile factories had to pay protection money to Cité Soleil gangs.

Wealthy Haitians are the main targets of Cité Soleil-based kidnappers who have been seizing up to 100 victims a month. “In Cité Soleil the gangs have replaced the state. If I was living in misery and a guy making a good living out of kidnapping gave me \$100 at the end of the week, I might think that kidnapping was better than misery,” said one UN official.

Not on the ballot, but lurking in the minds of many Haitians is the name of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, the murderous dictator forced into exile in France 20 years ago. Such has been the misery of the past two decades of broken promises that many Haitians look back nostalgically on the days of the Tontons Macoutes, Duvalier's feared enforcers.

Last year Duvalier finished top of a poll of most admired Haitian leaders. He was recently reported to be checking out property ahead of a possible comeback.

A more encouraging intervention came from Wyclef Jean, the US-based Haitian-born hip-hop star who has ploughed some of his musical fortune into relief work and who recently persuaded his friends Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie to visit some of his projects.

All of which has tied up more than 7,500 UN troops and 2,000 international policemen preparing for Tuesday's poll. "It's a huge operation," said Damian Onses-Cardona, Minustah's spokesman. UN workers effectively rebuilt the hotel they commandeered for Minustah headquarters, installing new power circuits and routing an internal communications system by satellite via Brindisi, Italy.

Onses-Cardona insisted that the effort and expense were worth it. "The whole country is ready for the elections except for one neighbourhood that is causing problems," he said. "Yes, all the problems will still be there the day after the elections, but at least we will have a legitimate government to work with. There's a sense on both sides that this is our last best chance to make Haiti work."

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Candidate Rails Against Haiti's Leaders

Feb. 5, 2006

(AP)

CBS News

(AP) A presidential candidate whose name was dropped from the ballot despite two Haitian Supreme Court rulings said Saturday the interim president, the prime minister and the electoral council should be jailed.

Haiti's Supreme Court twice ruled that Dumarsais Simeus, who was born in Haiti and moved to the United States at age 21, could run for president in his native country. But the interim government created a commission that excluded Simeus from the list of candidates allowed to run in Tuesday's election.

Simeus said the interim leaders and the electoral council should face punishment.

"The recourse is to go and arrest the prime minister, arrest the president and arrest the people in the electoral council who have refused to abide by the Supreme Court decision," Simeus, a multimillionaire, told The Associated Press and AP Television News.

Michel Brunache, the spokesman of interim President Boniface Alexandre, dismissed Simeus' argument.

"Simeus is speaking in anger," Brunache said. "It's the constitution, not the government, that says he cannot run for president. He is a U.S. citizen. He thinks that with his fortune he can do whatever he wants."

The question of whether Simeus can run for president has rocked Haiti, which has been led by a weak interim government since elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in a rebellion two years ago.

Though the constitution does not allow dual citizenship, the Supreme Court ruled in October that authorities had not proven Simeus was a U.S. citizen and said he could run.

The interim government created a nationality commission that excluded Simeus from the list of 35 candidates allowed to run for president, but the Supreme Court on Dec. 8 upheld its earlier ruling.

The next day the interim government announced it removed five of the 10 judges from the Supreme Court, calling it "a purely administrative measure." Two of the five ousted judges were part of the five-judge panel that had unanimously ruled in favor of Simeus.

Simeus, 65, the son of illiterate Haitian rice farmers, left Haiti at the age of 21 for the United States, where he became the multimillionaire owner of Simeus Foods in Texas. He said he is still legally a candidate.

The first electoral poll in Haiti, published Dec. 9, found he was the Haitians' second favorite choice for president, behind front-runner Rene Preval, an agronomist and former president. The two polled far ahead of the other candidates.

Simeus said no matter who wins, he stands ready to assist as a "freelancer" _ and not a government employee _ to help the new administration lift this Caribbean country out of its cycle of poverty, violence and despair, by attracting foreign investors.

Simeus said the last word had not been spoken over the decision to keep him off the ballot.

"Those guys have violated the law. And I may decide to pursue them in the future and bring them to justice and put them in jail," he said. "You should not circumvent the highest court's decision in any country and get away with it."

—

Associated Press writer Michael Norton contributed to this report.

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Aristide supporters rally before Haiti vote

05 Feb 2006

Source: Reuters

By Kieran Murray and Joseph Guylar Delva

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti--Hundreds of poor Haitians danced in the streets on Saturday and demanded the return of exiled leader Jean-Bertrand Aristide three days before a presidential vote that some fear will lead to chaos.

Loudspeakers mounted on trucks blared music as Aristide supporters waved banners, sang and danced in a campaign rally that wound from the streets of downtown Port-au-Prince into the sprawling Bel-Air slum.

They were marching in support of front-runner Rene Preval, an ex-president seen as an Aristide ally even though he has tried to distance himself from the firebrand former priest who was ousted in a rebellion two years ago.

"Preval, we can't wait any longer, bring back Aristide," the crowd chanted. One man lay in the street, a poster of Preval on one side and a poster of Aristide on the other.

"Preval and Aristide are twins!" others shouted.

Aristide, who has spent the last two years in exile in South Africa, remains the dominant and most divisive figure in Haitian politics and in Tuesday's election.

While Aristide is adored by many in Haiti's slums, business leaders despise him and others say he was a corrupt despot when he came to power.

The election is aimed at restoring democracy in Haiti after Aristide was toppled in February 2004. But it could plunge the poorest country in the Americas into yet another round of fighting between his supporters and enemies.

"There are many people who really fear maybe on election day there could be chaos, and that chaos could provoke violence," said Johan Van Hecke, head of a European Union parliamentary delegation in Haiti this week.

U.N. troops stepped up patrols in Haiti on Saturday to ensure security ahead of voting.

Armored personnel carriers loaded with U.N. peacekeepers crawled along streets on the edge of the capital's biggest and most dangerous slums, stopping passenger buses and private cars to search for weapons.

"People will see a lot of soldiers and a lot of police around to make sure people know the election is going to go smoothly," said David Wimhurst, a spokesman for the U.N. mission in Haiti.

'PEOPLE ARE NERVOUS'

The U.N. force was sent to back a feeble Haitian police after the 2004 rebellion. It has nearly 7,300 soldiers and 1,800 civilian police on the ground but they have been bogged down in frequent battles with slum gangs.

Hundreds of people have been killed and nearly 2,000 kidnapped for ransom in the last year.

Gang leaders and slum residents accuse Haiti's business elite of trying to spark election-day violence and deliberately placing polling stations well away from their neighborhoods to discourage the poor from voting.

Preval, opposed by Haiti's business elite, has stayed away from his own rallies, apparently fearing attack.

A 1987 election was halted when thugs killed more than 30 people in the capital city Port-au-Prince, most of them at a polling station in a school.

"It's a dangerous city and a dangerous time. People are nervous," said a Brazilian soldier with the U.N. force near Port-au-Prince's airport. "We are nervous."

Preval's two main rivals, businessman Charles Baker and former President Leslie Manigat, held street rallies on Saturday evening and pledged to restore order to Haiti after years of chaos.

Despite all the tension, political leaders and election officials are urging the nation's 3.5 million voters to cast their ballots, even if it means walking miles (kilometres) to a voting center.

"I heard there could be violence but if we are to hope for a real change in this country, we need to take the risk to go to vote," said Maxime Joanif, 29, a Port-au-Prince resident. "Whether there is violence or not, I'm going to vote."

Ex-Playboy model is “Mama” to Haiti’s poor children

(Reuters)

Khaleej Times Online

6 February 2006

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - When former centerfold Susie Krabacher cradles a crippled child in the orphanage she founded in Haiti, the Playboy mansion, a life of drugs and modeling and the heartache of an abused childhood seem far away.

“That was another lifetime. This is what I was put here to do.”

Surrounded by the smiling faces of dozens of abandoned, handicapped and ailing children in a modest compound of white buildings on a rutted, rocky road north of the Haitian capital, Krabacher seems strangely in her element.

A lean and striking blond American of 42 who stands out in a predominantly black nation, Haiti’s “Mama Blanche” speaks easily about the tough road that took her from years of abuse at the hands of a relative to 1983 Playboy centerfold to the trash-filled streets of the poorest country in the Americas.

“I just promised to God when I was a child that if he would help me not get killed, if I could survive, I was going to help kids.”

Spurred by this promise, she was ready to build her dream in Mongolia in 1994, but an acquaintance asked her why she would go so far away when troubled Haiti, so near, needed so much.

“I said, ‘I didn’t know Tahiti was poor.’ And he said, ‘no, no, Haiti.’ I’d never heard of Haiti.”

Krabacher quickly arranged a trip and spent her first night in Cite Soleil, a sprawling seaside shantytown in the capital that is home to some of Haiti’s poorest and has recently been the site of gunbattles between UN peacekeepers and gangs.

In 12 years in a violent and politically unruly nation, Krabacher says she has negotiated with gang leaders, turned away bribe-seeking bureaucrats and received death threats. She hopes Tuesday’s election can bring a semblance of stability.

Abandoned children

Krabacher has seen the worst of Haiti. Her kids, half of whom are severely handicapped or terminally ill, are gathered from the streets or found in pig pens, toilets and cages.

One year-old child was found in a sewage canal. When rescuers pulled him out, Krabacher said, they found cinder blocks tied to his shattered legs.

That child was a success story. He was adopted and lives in Wales. But she has seen hundreds of the children succumb.

“Going to the morgue is the worst. In every one of their little caskets we put a little note ... and in that note it says 'in this world, you were loved.'”

At her walled Mercy House, Mickey Mouse and other cartoon characters are painted on the small buildings, which contain neat rows of bunk beds, a kitchen and a medical room, all secured by an armed guard.

On a recent day, Krabacher carefully lifted tiny Carol from a bed. She had feared the 5-year-old, who weighs about 12 pounds (5.5 kg), wouldn't make it through the night.

Carol's red dress couldn't hide her twisted legs. Her body was rigid. “She had a cleft palate and the anesthesia went wrong during the operation. She suffered brain damage,” Krabacher said, laying the child down gently.

“She really loves the children and they love her. She is even more than what people say about her,” said Turenne Raquens, who just joined the orphanage as a director.

The Mercy & Sharing Foundation Krabacher started has three orphanages, six schools, a hospital and six feeding programs in Haiti. The orphanages are home to 120 kids and the charity feeds 3,300 a day on a donated annual budget of \$400,000 and \$700,000 in gifts of food, diapers and supplies.

Krabacher, who normally spends half her time in Haiti, says she does not miss the restaurants, cappuccino and fancy clothes of her former life and expects to die in Haiti -- but “hopefully not by a bullet,” she says with a smile.

“I know that when I die I will go to heaven, and by the time I die I think there will be a thousand of my kids up there. And they, I know, are talking about me. I'm usually the last person they see when they die.”

Another vote, same grim reality for Haiti

Feb. 6, 2006

REED LINDSAY

The Toronto Star

PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI—Since its first democratic elections 15 years ago, Haiti has been shattered by two violent government overthrows, torn apart by rancorous and often violent political conflict and twice intervened by foreign troops.

None of this will dissuade François Jules from voting in key elections tomorrow.

"I voted in the first free elections in 1990, and I'll keep voting every chance I get until the day I die," said Jules, a 50-year-old tailor, hunched over a pedal-powered sewing machine in an alleyway of a cinderblock slum known as Cité Marc.

Others here are more cynical.

"Elections won't change anything in this country," shouts Peter Jean-Louis, a 22-year-old student wearing a knitted Rastafarian cap, setting off a vociferous discussion in the alleyway. "I know all of the candidates and don't like any of them. All they want is money."

After more than two months of delays and controversy, Haiti is lurching toward the first round of presidential and congressional elections tomorrow.

Among Haiti's poor, opinions range from disgust with the political system to hopes that an electoral triumph by former president René Préval, the frontrunner in the presidential race, can turn the country around. Nearly two years after U.S. Marines whisked former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile in South Africa amid an armed rebellion, the hemisphere's poorest country has grown even poorer while violence has ravaged Port-au-Prince despite 9,000 United Nations peacekeepers.

UN and government officials are describing the elections as a last-chance effort to prevent Haiti from plunging into chaos.

"We're in a boat that is filling up with water and sinking," interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue told reporters last week. "The only opportunity to save ourselves, and it must not be squandered, is by voting."

The electoral process remains clouded with uncertainty.

Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) announced recently it was removing all polling stations from the enormous slum of Cité Soleil, meaning many residents will have to walk several kilometres to vote. CEP members say the decision is meant to prevent armed groups from intimidating voters, while Cité Soleil residents and political leaders accuse the government of attempting to disenfranchise the slum's masses.

Fears of election-day violence persist, and some critics charge that the CEP is so plagued by partisanship and incompetence that it could be incapable of holding free and fair elections.

Polls show Préval, a 63-year-old agronomist, winning at least one-third of the vote, more than three times the nearest competitor, but short of the 50 per cent required to avoid a runoff election March 19 with the second-place finisher.

Préval is widely respected among the poor for being an honest, efficient administrator.

His candidacy has provoked outcries from leading members of Haiti's tiny business and political elite, who see him as a puppet for the only politician they hate more: Aristide.

"Préval's candidacy spells disaster for my country," says Charles Henri Baker, a factory owner running a distant second to Préval in a recent poll. "Préval gave us nothing. He's an Aristide crony. If he won the presidency, Aristide would be back within a week and it would be February 2004 all over again."

Most Haitians seem less concerned with Préval's ties to Aristide and his supporters than with finding a way out of an ever-worsening crisis.

"We need a president now. We want Préval," says Titine, a 45-year-old street vendor who sells chicken parts at an open-air market and complains of rising prices and dwindling clients. "Deliver us."

Haiti election may pave way for Aristide's return

ABC News

Feb 5, 2006

By Tom Brown

MIAMI (Reuters) - Haiti's return to free elections when it votes for a new president on Tuesday may not go down well with the U.S. government, for all its talk about building democracy around the world, analysts say.

That's because the front-runner in the chaotic Caribbean country's presidential race is Rene Preval, a protege of ex-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Bush administration officials accused Aristide of despotism, and many Haiti experts say he was undermined by Washington in the run-up to his ouster in February 2004.

Preval, who served as president from 1996-2001 between Aristide's two terms, is not running as a member of Aristide's Lavalas Family party this time.

But he has said he sees no reason why Aristide should not return from exile in South Africa.

"It would be catastrophic for U.S. policy to work so hard to first marginalise and then eliminate Aristide and then, after doing that, for there to be an electoral road for an Aristide candidate to win office," said Larry Birns, director of the left-leaning Council on Hemispheric Affairs.

As Haiti edges toward its first election since armed rebels toppled Aristide, the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush has been largely silent about the fate of the poorest country in the Americas.

It has lent little visible support to the 9,000-strong UN peacekeeping force in Haiti and turned down a recent request from the UN electoral team for the loan of helicopters to collect ballots from remote areas.

Cycles of intervention and neglect are common in the "schizophrenic" history of U.S. relations with Haiti, said Daniel Erikson, a Caribbean expert at Washington-based think tank Inter-American Dialogue.

TYRANT RELYING ON GANGS

But the current U.S. level of engagement with Haiti could be driven by unease over Preval's comfortable lead among the 33 candidates, analysts said.

Preval has won support from many of Aristide loyalists in Haiti's teeming slums, and the same business elite that pressed for Aristide's ouster two years ago opposes him.

Roger Noriega, who served as the State Department's top official on Latin America at the time of Aristide's removal, denied that Washington played any part in toppling him.

But Noriega said the former priest had become a tyrant who relied on gangs to enforce his rule.

"We didn't hold him accountable for anything, and that's how we ended up in a situation where he could run hit squads and murder his political opponents, and then we're supposed to come in and save his bacon ... ," Noriega told Reuters.

As a ragtag band of street thugs and former soldiers marched toward the capital Port-au-Prince in February 2004, Aristide asked the United States to send in the Marines.

U.S. officials declined, and instead offered to fly Aristide out of the country to avoid what Noriega said was an imminent bloodbath.

Nothing, however, has improved since Aristide was exiled. And Haiti's poor majority does not appear to have abandoned its support for candidates associated with Aristide.

"While Aristide has been removed, his constituency remains alive and well," said Erikson. As long as the voting public lives on less than \$2 a day, populist appeals are going to have resonance in Haiti, he said.

Lawrence Pezzullo, special envoy to Haiti under former U.S. President Bill Clinton, said Preval was viewed as an Aristide crony.

"The fear with Preval is that he's going to invite Aristide back and then all bets are off, my friend. ... If he brings Aristide back, that thing will blow up," he said.

State Department officials declined to comment. But Noriega said that for Preval, Aristide's return "would be the end of his ability to run the country."

Haiti's fragile hopes rest on poll

Trapped in the crossfire between UN troops and slum gangs, civilians are determined to vote

Reed Lindsay in Port-au-Prince

Sunday February 5, 2006

The Observer

The Guardian Unlimited, UK

After more than two months of delays and controversy, the chaotic Caribbean nation of Haiti is lurching towards the first round of presidential and congressional elections on Tuesday.

Since the country's first democratic elections 15 years ago, Haiti has been shattered by two violent government overthrows, rancorous and violent political conflict and two interventions by foreign troops. On Friday schools were closed and the presidential front-runner cancelled a campaign rally amid heightened security concerns ahead of the vote.

None of this will keep François Jules from the polls. 'I voted in the first free elections in 1990, and I'll keep voting every chance I get until the day I die,' said Jules, a 50-year-old tailor, hunched over a pedal-powered sewing machine in an alley of a cinderblock slum known as Cité Marc. Others are more cynical.

'Elections won't change anything in this country,' shouts student Peter Jean-Louis, 22, setting off a vociferous street debate. 'I know all of the candidates and don't like any of them. All they want is money.'

Among Haiti's poor, opinions range from disgust with the political system to hopes that an electoral triumph by the former president, René Preval, can turn things around.

Two years after US marines whisked President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile amid an armed rebellion, the country has grown even poorer and violence-ravaged despite the presence of 9,000 UN peacekeepers. Nowhere are the failings of the interim government and the UN more glaring than in Cité Soleil, a seaside slum of an estimated 300,000 people where schools and the hospital are pockmarked by bullet-holes, young men with guns zip around in stolen SUVs, and UN peacekeepers are feared by the very people they are supposed to protect. On a recent night bullets whizzed over the roof of the public hospital and patients slept on the floor while doctors made their rounds ducking under windows.

'People are not safe in Cité Soleil, even in their homes,' said Sergio Cecchini of Médecins sans Frontières, which helped treat more than 100 gunshot victims here in January. 'The civilian population is caught in the crossfire. Among the wounded, 50 per cent are women, children and the old.'

Two UN battalions - 1,500 Jordanians with machine-guns and armoured vehicles - have been unable to root out armed groups from the warren of alleys and hovels. Four peacekeepers have been killed since Christmas and UN checkpoints sustain daily heavy fire. Many in Cité Soleil blame the violence on the UN for shooting wantonly from its tanks.

Mechanic Wilner Pierre, 35, lying bandaged on a hospital cot, says UN troops shot him. 'They stay inside their tanks and stick their guns out,' said Pierre. 'They shoot in any direction and at any person, even babies.'

Brigadier General Mahmoud al-Husban, head of the UN in Port-au-Prince, said soldiers shoot only when fired upon. But he concedes he cannot know the extent of 'collateral damage'.

Cité Soleil is controlled by numerous armed groups, some aligned with Aristide's Lavalas party, Haiti's largest political force, and supporting Preval. Leading members of Haiti's fiercely anti-Aristide elite blame the gangs for a spate of kidnappings that have panicked the capital's small middle and upper classes, and in recent weeks conservative business leaders have been demanding a UN-led crackdown in the neighborhood. But Lavalas accuse business leaders of trying to use the UN to clamp down further on the party and its supporters.

The UN is resisting a large-scale offensive. Nor has it attempted to negotiate with armed groups, hampered by the US-backed interim government's refusal to grant an amnesty.

'There is no military solution to Cité Soleil,' said al-Husban. 'The solution could be giving the gangs amnesty and more social help. Medicine, food, development projects. The government is not willing to solve Cité Soleil and they want us to go there and destroy it, to kill all the people there. We will not do this.'

'The UN has not been allowed to do what it traditionally does,' said Todd Howland, of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial's Centre for Human Rights. 'This is the only country in the world where you have a significant UN operation without a peace accord. You'd be hard pressed to find a case where marginalising a significant segment of society and failing to make any structural changes resulted in peace.'

UN and government officials see elections as Haiti's last chance. 'The only opportunity to save ourselves, and it must not be squandered, is by voting,' said interim Prime Minister Gérard Latortue.

Haiti on edge on election eve
BY LETTA TAYLER
STAFF CORRESPONDENT
Newsday, NY
Feb. 5, 2006

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- Shoving and screaming, a frustrated mob of about 200 Haitians practically stormed a government building here after waiting hours under a broiling sun for voting cards.

"Stop pushing!" a guard yelled as he forced back the crowd. United Nations peacekeepers trained their submachine guns on the would-be voters from a rooftop crowned with concertina wire.

Once inside, many in line laughed and clapped as election workers handed them their laminated cards. But others were turned away empty-handed after being told their cards still weren't ready.

"The elite are keeping our cards so they can manipulate the vote," shouted Fan-Fan Pierre, 31, a high school teacher who on a recent day was making his tenth fruitless trip to fetch his card.

A volatile mix of excitement, suspicion, chaos and fear pervades Haiti as it prepares for tomorrow's elections to replace leftist President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, whose ouster by armed rebels two years ago has pushed this troubled Caribbean nation to the brink of chaos.

Authorities have postponed the vote four times since October because of security and logistical problems. Though four-fifths of the electorate has registered, nearly one in 10 still lack voting cards. And concern remains widespread that armed groups of various political ilk could disrupt balloting in this country known for electoral violence.

"It's not impossible to hold free and fair elections, but it's going to be very dicey," said Mark Schneider, a Haiti expert with the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.

More than 1,500 people have been killed in political clashes since the firebrand Aristide's departure from Haiti, the hemisphere's poorest and least developed nation.

Problems in Cité Soleil

The biggest security problem remains Cité Soleil, a fetid seaside slum and Aristide stronghold on the edge of this chaotic capital. A 9,000-member, Brazilian-led UN peacekeeping force dispatched to Haiti after Aristide's fall has failed to quash gangs who rule the slum and allegedly rape, murder and kidnap in collusion with rogue police.

Cité Soleil is such a shooting gallery that the interim government won't put voting booths there, incensing many Cité Soleil residents who will have to walk up to 1½ miles to vote. In recent days, pro-Aristide gang members have led chanting, chest-beating protesters through the slum to denounce the absence of voting booths as a plot by a tiny but powerful elite.

"It's social exclusion. The bourgeoisie don't want the poor people to vote," said Baptiste William, 24, a reputed gang leader with cornrows and cafe-au-lait skin who is known as Ti Blanc (Haitian Creole for "Little White Man"). William said he would personally guarantee safety if the government allowed balloting in his Cité Soleil neighborhood of cinderblock and tin shacks pocked with bullet holes. Authorities say it would be unconscionable to accept the offer.

With security forces stretched thin, the interim government is providing only 800 polling centers nationwide. That's at least one-third fewer than many international election observers recommend for this mountainous, Maryland-sized nation of 8 million, where many people will travel miles by foot or mule to vote.

Despite the worries, Haiti assumed a carnival air over the weekend as campaigning ended for the 33 presidential candidates and hundreds contending for the 130-seat national legislature. In towns and cities across the nation, Haitians shimmied along pot-holed streets, chanting campaign slogans and waving candidates' flags to raucous racine music.

Overtones of drugs, violence

But UN tanks and truckloads of Haitian riot police guarded most rallies. Presidential front-runner René Préval, a former president and Aristide protégé, canceled his final campaign appearance Saturday in Port-au-Prince, saying he had received word of a planned attack.

The U.S. ambassador to Haiti, Tim Carney, hailed the elections as a critical step toward democracy but cautioned that he was "very concerned" that drug money was being funneled to some campaigns.

"Some of the presidential candidates have told me people with suitcases of money have shown up at the doorsteps of candidates for parliament," Carney told Newsday. None of the presidential front-runners is believed to have drug ties, Carney said.

Recent polls show Préval, 63, winning more than one-third of the vote. If no candidate captures more than 50 percent of the ballots, the top two will hold a runoff March 19.

An agronomist, Préval became Haiti's only democratically elected president to complete a five-year term when he left office in 2001. He has distanced himself from Aristide even as he echoes his former mentor's pledge to help the 70 percent of Haitians who live in poverty. He also has vowed to heal class divisions that have festered since slaves ousted French colonists two centuries ago.

"The people of Cité Soleil are living in a ghetto and the bourgeoisie are living in another ghetto, barricaded in their houses with electric fences and afraid to walk the streets," Préval told Newsday. "It's time for a new beginning."

Préval's closest rival is Charles Henri Baker, 50, an assembly-line factory owner and former U.S. resident who led anti-Aristide protests. With a slogan of "Order-Discipline-Work," he has promised to end chronic instability and chaos.

Baker denies he is an elitist, although as a white man he is a rarity in predominantly black Haiti. "If I'm prejudiced, it's against robbers and chimères [gang members], but I embrace everyone else," Baker declared Saturday during his closing rally in Port-au-Prince.

Jaded from centuries of despots and dazed by the plethora of presidential candidates, many Haitians say they won't vote. But others can't wait.

"I have to hope it'll make a difference," said Port-au-Prince housewife Vesta Bellizaire, 25. "Because it's amazing we're holding this election at all."

HAITI | GERARD LATORTUE

What kind of Haiti will he leave?

Haiti's interim government, led by Boca Raton resident Gérard Latortue, has gotten mixed reviews as it wraps up two years in power.

BY JACQUELINE CHARLES

Miami Herald

Feb. 4, 2006

PORT-AU-PRINCE - Almost two years ago, Gérard Latortue was plucked out of a comfortable retirement in Boca Raton to lead a chaotic Haiti back on a path to democracy after a bloody revolt ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The former U.N. negotiator and Haitian history buff was sworn in as interim prime minister amid promises to return security to this grindingly poor nation, revamp a police force that had just about collapsed and reconcile the country's bitterly divided political factions.

But as elections for a new government approach on Tuesday, his government is receiving decidedly mixed reviews -- credited with some key advancements, blasted for missing significant opportunities and at times abusing its powers.

Even his detractors give Latortue and his team of technocrats credit for strengthening Haiti's finances through programs that, among other things, increased government revenues and got rid of the notorious "zombies" -- no-show employees.

"The people will need time to realize what has been done," Latortue told The Miami Herald as he flew back to Haiti after meetings with U.S. State Department officials in Washington to discuss the presidential and legislative balloting Tuesday.

'FAR FROM A FAILURE'

"We saved the country from a civil war, and a big social explosion, and introduced more civility in political life," he said. "It's far away from being a failure, but I cannot expect to call it a complete success. It's definitely better."

But others say the Latortue government deserves a mixed report card of "C's" and "F's."

"If the elections take place and we have a legitimate government in power, then it was a success. But if they are not done properly and we have new insecurities, then it was a failure," said Micha Gaillard, spokesman for the opposition coalition Democratic Convergence, which helped force Aristide's 2004 ouster.

The elections were postponed four times amid bickering among members of Haiti's electoral council and between them and election experts from the Organization of American States and the United Nations.

The security situation has improved in most parts of the country of eight million people. But it has remained chaotic and at times worsened in the capital, where a surge in kidnappings and violence in the Cité Soleil slum has panic-stricken residents afraid to leave home after dark.

"The transition has been a complete failure," said Jean-Germain Gros, a Haiti expert at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. "The first mandate is security. Is Haiti safer now than before? No."

Gros acknowledged that Haitian history has long been plagued by political violence and noted that the United Nations, which has about 9,000 peacekeepers here, "did not have a robust security presence in the face of the collapse of the Haitian National Police."

"There should have been a much stronger intervention," Gros added.

Without the force in fact "this country would have probably collapsed," said Juan Gabriel Valdés, the Chilean diplomat who leads the U.N. mission here.

15 MANDATES

Under the political accord endorsed by the political factions after Aristide's ouster, the transition government had 15 mandates that ranged from arranging the new elections to investigating corruption and human-rights abuses under Aristide and his political party, the Lavalas Family.

And it was in carrying out these latter mandates that the interim government has been most criticized, with Aristide supporters and independent human rights activists accusing it of arbitrarily arresting and jailing thousands of Lavalas members.

The most high profile of these cases involved former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, who was eventually indicted for a 2004 massacre in the port city of St. Marc, and former Miami Haitian-rights activist Gérard Jean-Juste, a priest who was finally freed Sunday under heavy U.S. pressure and was allowed to fly to Miami for cancer treatment.

The two men's long detentions caught the eye of U.S. congressional leaders and human rights activists, and Jean-Juste was even declared a "prisoner of conscience."

Allegations of corruption also trailed Latortue's cousin, Youri Latortue, described in one French news report as "Mr. 10 percent" because of the commissions he allegedly demanded while working as the prime minister's security chief. The younger Latortue, a Senate candidate in Tuesday's election, has vehemently denied the accusations.

Gérard Latortue's own blunders, meanwhile, landed him in diplomatic hot water, including his description of rebels who led the revolt against Aristide as "freedom fighters." He also fired off a letter to Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson and recalled his ambassador from Kingston after Patterson invited the exiled Aristide to vacation in Jamaica. Caribbean leaders responded by refusing to recognize Haiti's interim government, saying they will revisit the issue after elections.

"Latortue did not understand the job," said Leslie Voltaire, a moderate Lavalas member chosen to help the transition after Aristide's departure. ``He did not have a constituency. He aligned himself with the elite and then they left him."

CONSENSUS BUILDER

Latortue, who said he is looking forward to returning to Boca Raton after he hands over the reins of power to the winner of the elections, disagrees. He is a consensus builder, he insists, whose office was always open to anyone.

The man whose name means "the turtle" and became a sharp jab in his first months in office, listed a few of his claimed successes as he wound up the interview: new roads, increased revenue, a civil service program and an end to government-sponsored violence. But the real success, he said, will belong to the Haitian people: free and fair elections on Tuesday.

Despite Haiti's troubles, election seen as a hope
Ex-president leads polls with strong backing from poor
Reed Lindsay, Chronicle Foreign Service
San Francisco Chronicle
Saturday, February 4, 2006

Port-Au-Prince, Haiti -- Since Haiti's first democratic elections 15 years ago, the nation has been shattered by the violent overthrow of two governments, unrelenting political conflict and several interventions by foreign troops.

But none of the above can dissuade Francois Jules from voting for a new president and legislature Tuesday. The election will be the first since an armed revolt two years ago forced former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power, leaving Haiti in the hands of a U.S.-backed interim government supported by 9,000 U.N. peacekeeping troops. About 85 percent of the nation's 3.5 million eligible voters are registered.

"I voted in the first free elections in 1990, and I'll keep voting every chance I get until the day I die," said Jules, a 50-year-old tailor.

Like many impoverished Haitians -- 56 percent of the nation's 8.5 million inhabitants survive on less than \$1 a day -- Jules' conviction matches his faith in the only two democratically elected presidents in Haiti's 200-year history: Aristide -- a former priest who championed the poor -- and Rene Preval, who governed between 1996 and 2001.

"I would like Aristide to return, but if that's not possible, there's only one other person whom I trust -- Preval," said Jules.

Most polls show Preval, a 63-year-old agronomist, as the presidential front-runner among 35 candidates. He is expected to win at least one-third of the vote, more than three times his nearest competitor, but well short of the 50 percent required to avoid a runoff election on March 19 with the second-place finisher.

Preval is widely respected among the poor for being an honest, efficient administrator. But among Haiti's tiny business elite, he is nothing more than an Aristide puppet.

"Preval's candidacy spells disaster for my country," said Charles Henri Baker, a factory owner who is running a distant second in most polls. Preval has campaigned to reform the nation's schools, health care and judicial systems, while Baker's main theme is restoring public order and reforming a corrupt police force.

"Preval gave us nothing. He's an Aristide crony," added Baker. "If he won the presidency, Aristide would be back within a week, and it would be February 2004 all over again."

At that time, U.S. Marines whisked Aristide away to Africa amid a bloody insurrection and charges that he financed armed gangs and tolerated corruption. Aristide, who preceded and succeeded Preval, remains a decisive factor in Haitian politics despite living in exile.

Even though Preval is backed by supporters of the deposed president, he has emerged from Aristide's shadow in recent weeks, running as a candidate for a coalition of minor political parties known as "the Hope" rather than Aristide's Lavalas party.

Former Prime Minister Marc Bazin, the Lavalas candidate for president, has publicly vowed to allow Aristide to return to Haiti if he is elected. Preval, on the other hand, argues that it is the former president's decision. Aristide has not publicly endorsed any candidate.

Unlike Aristide, who was known for his fiery oratory, Preval delivers short speeches and refrains from criticizing his opponents except when asking them to avoid violence and tone down their rhetoric. Some political observers say his low-key campaign is little different than his presidency, when he quietly directed infrastructure projects and an agrarian reform program.

Preval has assuaged international donors and lenders by promising not to challenge Haiti's free-market policies, according to Adama Guindo, who heads the United Nations Development Program in Haiti. And his candidacy has drawn no public concern from Washington.

If elected, Preval would inherit a country whose economy and environment have been ravaged by years of political violence, corruption and ineffectual government. But some observers say a more prickly issue could be how he deals with Aristide and his armed supporters.

The immense Port-au-Prince slum of Cite Soleil is controlled by armed groups, which officials say has prevented them from putting polling stations in the neighborhood, forcing residents to vote outside the area. Nevertheless, pro-Aristide armed groups in the slum are actively campaigning for Preval, a development that has outraged Haitian business leaders.

"I know Preval personally, and I can say he is a nice guy. He's easy-going, simple," said Jean Claude Paulvin, head of the Association of Haitian Economists. "The problem is not with Preval. It's with the guys around Preval, the gangs. Preval's going to be held responsible for what the gangs do."

But most Haitians are more concerned about finding a way out of an ever-worsening economic and political crisis that has left the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere even more impoverished.

"We need a president now. We want Preval," said Titine, a 45-year-old street vendor who sells chicken parts and complains of rising prices and dwindling customers. "Deliver us."

The Plight of Haiti's Children
The Washington Post Blog
Feb. 4, 2006

You can turn left or right, walk straight or backward - the direction doesn't matter. In the streets of Port-au-Prince and surrounding slums, the children of Haiti are everywhere.

Maladies that strike the children here are similar to those plaguing strife-ridden Darfur, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The main difference is that Haiti is not officially at war. Less than four hours by plane from New York and even closer to Miami, this country's next generation is in serious danger of not growing up.

The future -- and that is all Haiti has -- lies with this country's youngest generation -- and with nearly 4 million children, almost half of Haiti's population is under the age of 18. But children facing a serious lack of education, medical care, nutrition and housing are forced to live their lives doing nothing. Haiti is so poor that the child labor common in other parts of the developing world doesn't exist -- there is simply no work at all.

Walking through the streets, children in various states of dress outnumber those in impeccably clean school uniforms. From ripped clothing to an out-of-place Notre Dame T-shirt to wearing nothing at all, kids congregate in groups and make do playing with rocks masquerading as marbles.

Haiti is a tough place to have a childhood, but for orphans it is something unimaginable. There are thousands of children who have no one. With the help of his faith, Bishop Yves-Innocent Louis does his part running the Life is Wealth Orphanage, a 60-bed facility filled mostly with girls from 2 to 17 years old.

In a scene straight from *Oliver Twist*, children line up at a table eating in unison. The only difference from the Dickens version is that they smile as they eat the second of three meals that day. The orphanage is run with religious fervor and supported by Americans and the World Food Program. These children live in an entirely different world than those with families in places like Cité Soleil: They have a school, computer lessons and attend required religious services each week.

Fabienne Jean Baptiste, an 11-year-old girl with a soft voice, pigtails held in pink and blue berets and a checkered shirt, has been here since she was 2. She says she's happy and has many friends at the orphanage.

On another side of town, children are struggling just to eat more than one meal a day. Malnutrition runs rampant throughout the country, evident in swollen stomachs and the turning of hair to red. Contrast the hunger with the toy guns made of plastic and metal that can be found everywhere and the graffiti picturing the latest in weaponry that decorates many people's walls. The violence once meted out by the military is now alive and well in the minds and homes of the Haitian people.

Already, Haiti's youngest generation seems lost like so many before it, unable to lead the country out of its mess, or even to imagine a society free of violence and hunger. Then again, if Fabienne is able to realize her dreams of becoming a doctor, there just might be a chance for Haiti.

Award-winning photojournalist Ron Haviv is on the ground in Port-au-Prince documenting the run-up to Haiti's presidential

Haiti braces for its ballot

Nearly two years after Aristide was forced to flee, frazzled Haitians hope next week's election will stop their slide toward chaos, Marina Jiménez reports

MARINA JIMÉNEZ

Globe and Mail

February 4, 2006

PORT-AU-PRINCE — A man lifts up his white singlet and reveals a gaping gunshot wound on his lower back. The bullet has been removed, but an angry, pink gash, 15 centimetres long, still hasn't healed. "You see," says Nono, sitting on a chair outside his dilapidated corrugated tin shack in Cité Soleil, the notorious slum at Port-au-Prince's northern edge. "This is what MINUSTAH [the UN peacekeepers] did to me. I am too frightened to go to the hospital."

Nono says he is wholly innocent, a victim of trigger-happy United Nations peacekeepers, high on marijuana. He was wounded, he says, while trying to help two others who had also been shot by the blue-helmeted peacekeepers.

William Baptiste, a self-styled neighbourhood militant known as Tiblan, nods approvingly as Nono tells his tale. Tiblan is wanted for kidnapping and other charges, but the baby-faced gang leader, wearing shorts and sandals, is safe here. Haitian police are too frightened to enter this slum of concrete hovels and open sewers.

"MINUSTAH isn't doing any good and have brought no stability to Haiti," Tiblan says. "There is no civil war here, we are just fighting to have a better life."

It is impossible to sort out fiction from reality inside this infamous shantytown -- the poorest area in the poorest country in the Americas. The only certainty is that the slum's 200,000 destitute residents are caught in the crossfire between the armed gangs, and the peacekeepers.

The UN mission was sent to stabilize the country of 8.5 million after armed rebels, former soldiers and U.S. pressure forced President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile on Feb. 29, 2004.

Since his departure, more than 1,500 people have been killed, including nine UN peacekeepers. Mark Bourque, a retired RCMP officer from Quebec, was shot by bandits not far from Nono's stoop, just 100 metres from a UN checkpoint.

On Tuesday, Haiti will finally hold an election to replace the interim government, with hopes that a new president can re-establish order.

Many Haitians blame the United States and France for Mr. Aristide's ousting, and his followers in Cité Soleil have spent months calling for his return, though they are now supporting front-runner René Préval, a former Aristide protégé.

No matter who wins the election, Haiti's deep-rooted problems of poverty and political division will be difficult to solve.

Since becoming the world's first black republic 202 years ago, Haiti has endured 32 military coups, foreign intervention and occupation by the U.S., and a series of brutal dictators, the most notorious of them being François (Papa Doc) Duvalier.

Today, Haiti ranks among the worst in the world in terms of life expectancy, infant mortality, corruption and environmental degradation. One-quarter of the country's beleaguered 6,000-member police force is corrupt, according to the chief of police.

The country's roads are in terrible shape, phone lines are unreliable and many people have no electricity or running water. A recent UN report found that 55 per cent of Haitians live on less than \$1 a day and 42 per cent of children under the age of 5 are malnourished. Warring gangs occupy the slums, while ex-soldiers from the army Mr. Aristide disbanded maintain an intimidating presence in the countryside.

Without a legitimate government to disarm these disparate groups, and to reconcile opposing political forces, there is a real danger Haiti's fortunes will continue to spiral downward.

The interim government has proven inept and has failed to rebuild the country's crumbling infrastructure.

The UN mission has accused the government of prolonging its mandate by stalling preparations for the election. Initially scheduled for October, 2005, they have been postponed four times in four months.

A recent Gallup poll shows that Mr. Préval, who served as Haiti's president from 1996 to 2001, commands 37 per cent of the vote. The 53-year-old agronomist has benefited from Mr. Aristide's base of support, even as he has attempted to distance himself from the exiled leader.

From an elite family and educated abroad, Mr. Préval nonetheless draws high levels of support from Haiti's poor and uneducated and from those in non-urban areas. He is seen as a moderate.

He entered the campaign late and has avoided the limelight. He was forced to cancel a closing rally set for today after being shot at during an earlier event.

His closest rival among the 32 other presidential contenders is Charles Baker, a white businessman whose campaign slogan is "Law, Discipline and Work." About 10 per cent of voters -- largely farmers in the countryside and Haiti's wealthy business class -- support him, according to the poll.

A UN official observes that Haiti's wealthy elite is fearful of a Préval victory and has done its best to undermine him. "The business community wanted an election without Aristide but they didn't want an election with his protégé either," the official says. And yet their efforts have only served to increase Mr. Préval's popularity.

His campaign platform is moderate, with promises to build roads and schools, attract foreign investment and bring security to Haiti. But it remains to be seen whether he will be the figure of reconciliation the country needs.

The next president will have to navigate the delicate issue of Mr. Aristide's return. While Mr. Préval has said the exiled leader is welcome to come back, his return is sure to destabilize the country.

Claude Boucher, Canada's ambassador, believes the new president's first priority must be to "disarm the gangs and neutralize the violence."

Haitians are tired of watching as their country, which shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic, sinks deeper into lawlessness and impunity.

"We cannot take our children to school any more because there is shooting all the time. We cannot live decently," says Reme Zaren, 46, as she washes clothing in a plastic bucket by the side of her rickety shack inside Cité Soleil.

The slum is considered so volatile that no voting stations have been set up there; residents must go to polling stations a 30-minute walk away.

In the past year, Médecins sans frontières (Doctors Without Borders), which operates two hospitals here, has treated nearly 2,500 people for violence-related injuries, many of them women, children and the elderly.

Kidnappings for ransom are a daily occurrence, with many of the victims held in dilapidated homes accessible only through the shantytown's rabbit warren of alleys.

Diplomats do not dare come here, and drive around the city in armoured vehicles.

Many embassies have evacuated the spouses and dependents of their officials.

A report by the International Action Network on Small Arms found that the country is awash with as many as 200,000 small arms, most held illegally.

Haiti's new leader will face the "enormous and unenviable" task of bringing back the country from collapse, says Bob Maguire, chairman of the international affairs program at Trinity University in Washington, and a Haiti expert. "Haiti needs a durable peace agreement among Haitians and a sense that the poor can begin to see signs of improvement in their lives."

This week, Cité Soleil was unusually quiet, as gang leaders laid down their arms in an unofficial truce before voting day. Tiblan, the gang leader, happily showed journalists around, pointing out burned-out buildings and bullet-riddled homes, all damage inflicted by UN soldiers, he says.

The Brazilian-led UN mission acknowledges that civilians have been killed in the conflict, but says peacekeepers respond only to fire from armed bandits.

The \$584-million-a-year (U.S.) mission is now operating at full strength with 9,000 soldiers and police officers from 33 countries including Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Nepal and Canada, which has sent in 150 police officers. Locals however continue to criticize the mission, calling it "TOURISTAH," accusing peacekeepers of failing to act against criminals.

Two Jordanian battalions of 1,500 troops assigned to Cité Soleil were initially seen as trigger happy. But during a recent visit to the slum, the soldiers appeared to spend most of their time inside their tanks. Several emerged briefly to shoo away barefoot, ragged children and declined to speak to a journalist.

In yet another blow to morale, Lieutenant-General Urano Teixeira de Matta Bacellar, MINUSTAH's Brazilian commander, committed suicide Jan. 7, apparently overwhelmed by internal politicking and the mission's complexity. He shot himself in the mouth inside the upscale Montana Hotel, his body found by hotel staff slumped over on his balcony at 6:45 a.m.

Juan Gabriel Valdes, the chief of the UN mission, called the suicide a tragedy and conceded that the mission has been a difficult one. However, he points out that the peacekeepers have managed to secure several other no-go zones in the capital, including Belair, another slum and stronghold for armed Aristide supporters, which is now relatively peaceful. Cité Soleil is their last remaining challenge.

"Cité Soleil is a wound in the heart of Haiti," he says. "It is an expression of the level of inhumane conditions in which people are forced to live. Gangsters are the only authorities there. There is a complete absence of state authority."

He believes the solution is not military: "We are not an occupation army. But we do want to rid the city of some of the worst gangs before a new government takes over," he says. "Our main challenge is to separate the community people from the bandits."

Jordanian troops, who don't speak French, will be rotated out of Cité Soleil, and replaced with soldiers from another country, he says. "The Canadian army would be welcome here. We know they are well trained and they know the language."

Mr. Valdes believes the election will give Haitians a chance to start over: "Haitians have to understand that this is their last opportunity to build a political system. Their own fights are not interesting to the rest of the world. They must find a way to live together," Mr. Valdes says with a note of frustration.

The election has been repeatedly postponed, partly due to difficulties distributing registration cards to 3.5 million voters. About 90 per cent of registered voters now have their identity cards and ballot boxes; pens and indelible ink to mark voters' thumbs have been delivered to 804 voting centres around the country. More than 40,000 poll workers have been recruited and trained by the UN, which is helping to monitor and oversee the \$73-million election.

In Cité Soleil, Tiblan promises the poor won't instigate violence on Tuesday -- although he fears the wealthy elite might, knowing the wrong candidate is in the lead.

"Some sectors in society want to block elections. But we are poor and we want the election to happen," Tiblan says, as men push wheelbarrows down a pock-marked road and flies buzz around piles of rotting garbage.

Nono, the man with the gunshot wound, complains that he has no money to treat his injury, no job and no future prospects. "My mother died. And she was the only one who used to care for me," he says, reflecting the sense of hopelessness that pervades this place.

Brief history of Haiti

For more than two centuries, political turmoil and economic despair have plagued Haiti, which has seen 32 coups and a string of leaders that have driven it into crisis.

1492: Christopher Columbus lands and names the island Hispaniola, or Little Spain.

1697: Spain cedes the western part of Hispaniola to France, and this becomes Haiti, or Land of Mountains.

1801: Former black slave Toussaint Louverture leads a revolt that conquers Haiti.

1804: Haiti becomes independent; former slave Jean-Jacques Dessalines declares himself emperor.

1915: The United States invades Haiti following black-mulatto friction, which Washington thinks endangers its property and investments in the country.

1934: The United States withdraws its troops from Haiti, but maintains fiscal control until 1947.

1956: Voodoo physician François (Papa Doc) Duvalier seizes power in a military coup.

1971: Mr. Duvalier dies and is succeeded by his 19-year-old son, Jean-Claude, or Baby Doc.

1986: Baby Doc flees Haiti in the wake of mounting popular anger and is replaced by Lieutenant-General Henri Namphy as head of a governing council.

1990: Former priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide is voted into office, the country's first democratically elected president.

1991: Mr. Aristide is ousted in a coup led by Brigadier-General Raoul Cedras, triggering United Nations sanctions.

2000: Mr. Aristide is elected president for a second non-consecutive term, amid allegations of irregularities.

2004: A bloody rebellion and pressure from the United States and France forces Mr. Aristide out of the country. An interim government takes over and a UN stabilization force restores order.

Haiti Progres
This Week in Haiti
February 1, 2006

New York Times Reveals
U.S. Support of 2004 Haiti Coup

Finally, almost two years after the fact, it's official: the Bush administration backed and encouraged the February 29, 2004 coup d'état against President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

This is the message delivered by a long article entitled "Democracy Undone: Mixed U.S. Signals Helped Tilt Haiti Toward Chaos" by Walt Bogdanich and Jenny Nordberg in the U.S. journal of record, The New York Times, on Sunday, Jan. 30, 2006.

The Times' revelations, although obvious to most Haitians and international observers well before the fateful day when U.S. Special forces kidnapped Aristide from his home and exiled him to Africa, is important because it comes from the flagship publication of the U.S. establishment. In fact, the article's broad outlines are similar to that of a piece published by independent journalist Max Blumenthal in Salon. Com on Jul. 16, 2004 (see Salon article).

Nonetheless, Bogdanich and Nordberg provide important new details of the inner struggles and workings of the U.S. government.

In many ways, the article falls within the larger struggle that the U.S. liberal establishment is presently waging against George Bush and Dick Cheney's neo-conservative cabal, which has led the U.S. empire to the brink of disaster. Establishment media like the Times as well as high-ranking Democrats, who were cheering Bush only months ago, are now savaging the president and his clique for the war in Iraq, spying on American citizens, and alienating governments and peoples around the world. Now the liberals are adding the mess in Haiti to the list of Bush failures.

The main protagonist of the Times piece is former U.S. Ambassador to Haiti Brian Dean Curran, a Clinton appointee who complains that the Bush administration worked "to undermine the reconciliation process after disputed 2000 Senate elections threw Haiti into a violent political crisis," the Times reported.

Buttressing Curran's charges is Luigi Einaudi, the former U.S. representative to the Organization of American States, who said that "Haiti came to symbolize within the United States a point of friction between Democrats and Republicans that did not facilitate bipartisanship or stable policy or communication."

Indeed, Stanley Lucas, the infamous operative of the National Endowment for Democracy's International Republican Institute (IRI) in Haiti since 1998, is singled out as the principal U.S. agent responsible for ringleading Haiti's armed and "unarmed" opposition into intransigence against Aristide.

As early as July 2002, Curran was warning Washington that Lucas' role in Haiti "will, at best, lead to confusion as to U.S. policy objectives, which continue to eschew unconstitutional acts and favor negotiations and, at worst, contribute to political destabilization in Haiti."

Many will be skeptical that constitutionality and "negotiations" were ever really "U.S. policy objectives," as the terribly naive or disingenuous Curran contends. But the Times makes it clear that Lucas, by Curran's account, was central to encouraging "the opposition to stand firm, and not work with Mr. Aristide, as a way to cripple his government and drive him from power."

The story offers a penetrating account of how, "with Washington's approval, Mr. Lucas used taxpayer money to fly hundreds of opposition members - but no one from Mr. Aristide's Lavalas party - to a hotel in the Dominican Republic for political training that began in late 2002. Two leaders of the armed rebellion told The Times that they were in the same hotel during some of those meetings, but did not attend."

Those two leaders - Guy Philippe and Paul Arcelin - may have had secret back-room meetings at the luxurious Santo Domingo Hotel with Lucas and other "civil" opposition leaders, the Times reports. Politician Marc Bazin's representatives, who attended the 2002 meetings in Santo Domingo, told their boss that "more was going on than routine political training."

"The report I got from my people was that there were two meetings - open meetings where democracy would be discussed and closed meetings where other things would be discussed, and we are not invited to the other meetings," Bazin told the Times.

"Mr. Bazin said people who had attended the closed meetings told him that 'there are things you don't know' - that Mr. Aristide would ultimately be removed and that he should stop calling for compromise," Bogdanich and Nordberg write.

The Times story also singles out Otto Reich, former Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, and his successor, Roger Noriega, as the powers that kept Lucas operating despite Curran's objections.

Bogdanich and Nordberg deftly reveal Reich to be a liar. When interviewed by the Times, Reich claimed that Curran "never expressed any problems with Stanley Lucas to me, and I was his boss."

"Asked why his name showed up on cables as having received Mr. Curran's complaints, and why Mr. Curran's cables detailed discussions with him, Mr. Reich replied: 'I have absolutely no recollection of that. I'm not questioning it, I just have no recollection of that,'" the Times writes.

Curran called Reich's assertion that he never complained "a patent lie."

For all its weight and usefulness, the Times story is weak in many respects. It never refers to Aristide's overthrow as a coup d'état, and it lends credence to Curran's claim that Aristide "disappointed" him and engaged in "human rights abuses."

The story also implies that Clinton and the Democrats were somehow less meddling and more well-meaning than Bush's administration. In fact, there are only differences of approach and style. Since the U.S. intervention in 1994, Clinton demanded neoliberal reform, denied Aristide the three years he'd

spent in exile, and exerted heavy political pressure on the government of President René Préval. Clinton began the U.S. aid cut-off to Haiti in 2000 when Préval was still in office.

In short, Lucas was not a rogue agent of a rogue institution subverting U.S. goals, as the article suggests. Lucas and IRI are just more aggressive, uncompromising, and brutal in pursuing the empire's goals.

These shortcomings aside, Bogdanich and Nordberg do clearly demonstrate how "a democracy-building group close to the White House, and financed by American taxpayers, undercut the official United States policy and the ambassador assigned to carry it out."

Indeed, one is reminded of how the U.S.'s "invisible" government of the CIA and Pentagon sabotaged the Clinton administration's first attempt to restore Aristide in October 1993, when a few dozen FRAPH thugs theatrically scared away the U.S. troop carrier Harlan County.

It is nice to see Stanley Lucas exposed once again, as he was by Blumenthal, as a lying agent of Washington. Bogdanich and Nordberg easily dispel his clumsy misrepresentations. For example, Lucas claims to not know "rebel" leader Guy Philippe. But the Times reports that Philippe calls Lucas "a good friend" whom he has known for years. Philippe also says he met Lucas in Ecuador "once or twice" in 2000 or 2001. Is it chance that those meetings coincide with the start of Guy Philippe's rise as a "rebel" leader?

Now working for IRI in Afghanistan, Lucas was not allowed by his bosses to talk directly to the Times. Perhaps they feared he might make the kind of revelations that a boasting Emmanuel "Toto" Constant, the FRAPH death squad leader, did about being a CIA agent in a 1996 CBS-TV "60 Minutes" interview.

Bogdanich and Nordberg also produced a video program entitled "Haiti: Democracy Undone," which expands on their Times' investigation. It premiered this week in Canada and in the U.S. on the Discovery Times Channel.

Father Gérard Jean-Juste Provisionally Freed for Medical Treatment

In the face of mounting international pressure, on Jan. 29 Haitian de facto authorities allowed political prisoner Father Gérard Jean-Juste to provisionally leave his jail cell and fly to Miami to obtain medical treatment for recently contracted pneumonia as well as leukemia, with which he was diagnosed almost two months ago (see *Haïti Progrès*, Vol. 23, No. 39, 12/7/2006).

Accompanied from Haiti by one of his North American lawyers, Bill Quigley, Jean-Juste flew on American Airlines to Miami where he was met at the airport by about 25 people, including leaders from Veye Yo, the Miami-based popular organization he helped found in the 1980s when he directed the Haitian Refugee Center. Among those in the welcoming committee were Lavarice Gaudin, Farah

Juste, Lucie Tondreau, Veronique Fleurimé, and Reginald "Konpè Rere" Boyer. North American supporters like Jack Lieberman, Carolyn Thompson, and Steve Forester were also on hand.

Jean-Juste was then driven directly to Jackson Memorial Hospital, where Dr. Paul Farmer of Partners in Health awaited him to do an examination. He was admitted to the hospital and will spend several days receiving tests and treatment.

"The doctor performed a biopsy, and we'll have results in about three days," reports Tony Jean-Thénord, a Veye Yo leader, on Jan. 31. "His neck is still swollen. But he is in good spirits, fighting spirits, as usual."

Jean-Juste had been held without charges in jail for 192 days, since he was arrested on Jul. 21, 2005 after helping to officiate at the funeral of assassinated journalist Jacques Roche, who was also his cousin (see *Haiti Progrès*, Vol. 23, No. 20, 7/27/2005). He was accused informally of organizing Roche's murder, although he was out of the country at the time.

A Haitian judge last week dismissed those charges but brought others against the priest for illegal weapons possession and criminal conspiracy (see *Haiti Progrès*, Vol. 23, No. 46, 01/25/2006). Jean-Juste's lawyers are appealing the indictment.

Unless the indictments are dismissed on appeal, Jean-Juste has agreed to eventually return to Haiti to stand trial.

Meanwhile, on Sunday, thousands of Haitians spontaneously massed outside the Veye Yo meeting hall on Little Haiti's 54th Street, expecting Jean-Juste to show up. The Miami Police began to get aggressive with the crowd and Veye Yo leaders had to call Representative Kendrick Meek. He intervened with the Miami police chief, diffusing the confrontation. The demonstrators rallied all day until about 9 p.m.

"It was a very joyous day for the Haitian community in Miami," said Lavarice Gaudin.