

Cite Soleil, Port-au-Prince, Haiti  
February 15, 2007

### Slipping in Soleil's Mud

Boukman radio station on the wharf in Soleil made the announcement. The manifestation will start near the wharf.

About a thousand people were singing and dancing already. People of all ages with the man with the megaphone in front. The radio speakers blaring from behind. Walking up Soleil 1.

Two MINUSTAH tanks approach from the rear and creep towards the crowd and the megaphone man tells everyone to move. The tanks pass and I hear not a word from either side. The guns are pointed up. And the singing continues.

We keep walking. The slum people filter into the growing crowd from the maze of shanties that seem to go forever.

A little lady's hand shakes as she shows me her son's tiny school picture in the palm of her hand. Her boy is not marching today on the street of Soleil. His body lies in the morgue, a foreigner's bullet having struck him in his school room in December. She wants to bury him but "doesn't have the means".



We reach the machan who are selling at Bois Neuf-Soleil corner. Three white MINUSTAH tanks sit poised in their usual positions caddy corner from the market. The crowd is big and filled with gang members. I watch their eyes as they glance up at the building behind the tanks. Soldiers take pictures out of the windows of the crowd below them.

Everyone stops and stares at the three white tanks. The music is loud from Boukman. "Peace for Cite Soleil" rings out from the crowd and temporarily drowns out Boukman.



MINUSTAH soldiers wave back at the crowd and flash the peace sign from their brown Brazilian fingers. They understand their poor brothers and sisters in front of them.

The crowd passes in front of the tanks and the megaphone man motions them to stop when the tanks start to move forward. The crowd stops and lets MINUSTAH slowly move out and head toward Bois

Neuf. The crowd follows. I take a big breath as the tanks proceed in front of the crowd. And pray for no gunshots.



We walk and the singing becomes gentler and more beautiful. The Soleil crowd is big now, maybe five thousand? I jumped up on the median so I can walk quickly but slip in some mud pies that are baking in the morning sun. The crowd goes crazy laughing. Haitian food is stuck on me. I feel like I have done something sacrilegious by slipping, smearing and destroying someone's food. But maybe the foolishness of yet another blan will somehow decompress rather than

inflare.

Everyone turns right on Bois Neuf. Thousands more people have joined us. We reach a two story building on the left which is MINUSTAH's local base. The black rifle barrels point out tiny slits in the building. We can see black sunglasses but not the full face of the humans holding the guns. Green tree branches are swayed back and forth in front of the building by the crowd as they tell MINUSTAH to go home and that Soleil wants peace.

I pray that no shots ring out. None do. We keep walking.

The sun is high now and we reach Route National 1. All traffic is stopped and everyone waves. The crowd must be 10,000 now. African UN forces nonchalantly talk on their walkie-talkies and the crowd continues to dance and sing.

Route National 1 is beautiful for the first time in many years with thousands of green branches forming a canopy in the air waving rhythmically with the music.

MINUSTAH soldiers occupy another building on our right in Soleil and they wave from windows from the top floor. Peace signs come again from their hands.

We turn onto Rue Boston and head back into Soleil. The crowd divides. Some march forward. I turned down a street heading straight down into the maze of shanties following and being followed by many.

Two blocks later, I could see a beautiful mural of Jesus on the wall in front of me and immediately knew where we were. A gang leader's base which had been destroyed by MINUSTAH one week before loomed in front of us.

A truck and a car were burned metal heaps with MINUSTAH "bombs". Walls were blown off the front of a slum dwellers house that abutted the gang's base.

It looked like a place of death.

We walked straight ahead and could see another MINUSTAH base in Beleco to the left with the soldiers on the top floor watching the crowd.

I turned right. The crowd turned left to catch up with the others.

Two hours was enough for me. I exhaled. There was no violence. I walked back to the middle of Soleil with everyone smiling and saying hello on the street.

I don't think I have ever felt so peaceful. How can that be in the middle of one of the world's most infamous and dangerous slums?

Everyone involved had shown the world that there was very little to fear. People on both sides had looked at each other separated by a few precious feet and wondered if all the killing and misery was really necessary after all. A huge statement had been made by the warring factions amidst thousands of the poorest people in the world giving witness and singing songs of hope.

Peace is here today. This morning. Everyone wanted it. That was proven. No one had to sit around a polished desk drinking bottled water to talk about the "possibility of peace" in Soleil.

Prosperity is possible here also if big people and big countries allow it. No one should be eating baked mud pies made from the toxic dirt and water of Soleil.

The women in the crowd with white scarves and shirts that said "For Haiti" deserve the basics for themselves and their babies. They don't deserve more green sewage, mosquitoes and malaria. They don't need more bullets and trembling hands trying to get their lost children from the morgue.

The peace I felt was total and came from the profound tranquility that non violent action can bring. If the war in the slum could stop for two hours, with green branches waving and peace signs flashing from both sides, why can't the killing stop in Soleil for three or four hours or forever?

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