

# Repression in Haiti: The Responsibility of the Left

By Raul Zibechi | March 28, 2007

A few days before Christmas—at three o'clock in the morning on December 22—400 armored troops commanded by Brazilian officials attacked Cité Soleil. As helicopter air support opened fire, the terrified population ran for shelter in the ramshackle homes and buildings of the poor Port-au-Prince neighborhood. The attack by the UN Mission to Stabilize Haiti (MINUSTAH) “blue helmets” was officially a mission to fight “criminal gangs” controlling the neighborhood, and according to various sources it left between 30 and 70 people dead. Women and children were killed in their homes while sleeping. The Haitian News Agency affirms that victims were innocent and the Red Cross coordinator, Pierre Alexis, said UN soldiers prevented Red Cross vehicles from entering the zone to assist wounded children.<sup>1</sup>

Cité Soleil is a sprawling slum of improvised dwellings inhabited by half a million people, and plopped down amid large pools of dirty water and human and animal excrement. Human rights activist Pierre-Antoine Lovinski maintains, “Everyday in Cité Soleil, soldiers assassinate poor people for no reason.” Haiti, in his estimation, suffers repression that he defines as “a war against the poor.”<sup>2</sup> University of Haiti economics professor Camille Chalmers goes one step further, claiming that from a security standpoint, “we are worse off than before the military intervention.”<sup>3</sup>

The Haitian tragedy is an old one, but its latest chapter began in February of 2004, when the United States, Canada, and France contributed to the fall of the legitimate president, Jean Bertrand Aristide, in what could be described as a *coup d'état*—in flagrant violation of the Democratic Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS).

## Latin American Troops

The UN military contingent commanded by Brazil was deployed in June of 2004, four months after the *coup* that ousted Aristide. It was not the first UN intervention on the island: In 1994, the Security Council authorized the deployment of a multinational force of 20,000 soldiers (the United Nations Mission in Haiti, or MINUHA) to facilitate the return of President Aristide, who had first been removed from power by a *coup* in 1990. Aristide had been elected president that year with 67% of the vote in the first democratic elections in Haitian history.

The February 2001 presidential elections were boycotted by the opposition. Aristide won soundly, but estimates showed that only 20-30% of registered voters went to the polls. The new government never enjoyed stability—parts of civil society mobilized and demanded Aristide's resignation citing a drift toward authoritarianism, and the opposition and armed groups attempted to destabilize the government. In February 2004 an armed movement emerged from the city of Gonaives that threatened to sweep the country. The United States, with the support of Canada and France, forced Aristide out of the country (the Marines “escorted” him to the airport).



Soldiers of the MINUSTAH in Cité Soleil.



In March, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan recommended the creation of a multinational stabilization force. On April 30, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1542 which created the MINUSTAH. That same day, troops began deploying from Brazil to Port-au-Prince (the largest group had 1,200 members). Canadian, French, and U.S. troops already on the island joined the mission headed up by Brazil. Shortly thereafter, Argentina deployed 500 troops, Chile followed suit, and Uruguay gradually built up its military presence to 750. The Mercosur countries now contribute 40% of the total number of MINUSTAH troops.

One major difference between the 1994 military intervention and the current one is the strong influence of the Latin American left. Troops from leftist governments play a critical role, both as part of the occupying forces and in directing them.

### The Occupation in Numbers

- Beginning of the Mission: June, 2004.
- Military personnel from MINUSTAH in Haiti: 6,681 soldiers and 102 officials. Total: 6,783.
- Civil personnel: 433 International, 1,263 Local, 193 UN Volunteers. Total: 1,859.
- Latin American countries supplying troops: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.
- Casualties: 15 soldiers dead and 38 injured.
- Cost of the mission: \$490 million (July 2006-June 2007).
- MINUSTAH is commanded by General Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz (Brazil).

Since the armed forces from progressive countries arrived, at least three massacres have taken place in Cité Soleil. The first was on July 6, 2005, when Brazilian troops and Haitian police fired on the population, killing 23, although other reports cite a total of 26. Weeks later, two American activists linked to the Haiti Action Committee (David Welsh of Berkeley and Ben Terrell of San Francisco) verified the way in which MINUSTAH soldiers operated in Cité Soleil. “They fired into the streets and into the houses,” Welsh explained. “They say the people from the neighborhoods fired first. That is not what we saw or what we’ve been told. The so-called UN

‘peace force’ is playing a very destructive role,” Terrell affirmed.<sup>4</sup>

The second massacre, mentioned above, took place on Dec. 22, 2006. In the third, on January 25, 2007, Brazilian troops, along with Bolivian, Uruguayan, and Chilean soldiers, carried out an operation in Cité Soleil that killed five. In each case, no MINUSTAH forces were injured; the dead were all Haitians invariably described as “gang members” by the UN forces.

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The operative repeated a pattern of attacks on the poor population of a neighborhood where the Lavalas party, which backs Aristide, enjoys widespread support. In early 2006, the daily newspaper *Folha de Sao Paulo* interviewed Brazilian soldiers stationed in Haiti between Dec. 2004 and June 2005. Their testimonies speak for themselves: “The name ‘Peace Mission’ is just to pacify the people. In reality, no day goes by without the troops killing a Haitian in a shootout. I personally killed at least two,” acknowledges a soldier, showing photographs of bodies scattered among the streets of Cité Soleil, devoured by dogs.<sup>5</sup>

### Simple Questions, Difficult Answers

This brief description of serious incidents in the past confirms that the UN blue helmets are violating human rights and killing innocent people in Haiti. Why, then, are progressive and leftist governments from Latin America sending soldiers to Haiti? Why are the people from those countries not reacting to the massacres being perpetrated by “their” soldiers? The answer to these questions requires that we consider three factors: Brazil’s military geopolitical objectives in the region, the role of the left

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where it holds power, and finally, the relationship between domestic and foreign policies.

While allying itself with many South American countries, Brazil has been pushing for the creation of a South American armed force, a project that has been dubbed the “South American NATO.” Brazilian Colonel Oliva Neto—architect of Lula’s presidential campaign—revealed last November that South American military cooperation forms part of one of the National Defense System’s projects to “prevent a military incursion or pressure from an outside force on the region or a South American country.”<sup>6</sup>

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### Several testimonies accuse the Brazilian armed forces of human rights violations.

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The purpose is to defend national resources, specifically the Amazon—a task considered top priority by the country’s armed forces. Oliva Neto recalls that the continent has “a considerable amount of oil, the world’s largest water reserve, and rich biodiversity.” In his opinion this creates “a risky environment in the medium term, prone to international military pressure on South America.” He argues that when the energy, water, and raw materials crises “outside South America begin to create international stress, other countries could cast their eyes this way.”

Oliva Neto considers the UN military mission in Haiti an embryo of the South American armed forces. Or at least, a sort of testing ground for directing joint forces and coordinating regional battalions. The success of the mission would afford Brazil a strong trump card when it comes time to create a South American armed force. In theory, this could complete the political-economic cohesion Brazil has sought through the creation of the South American Community of Nations. At the same time, launching the mission serves as a way of limiting U.S. hegemony in Latin America while gaining international recognition, thus legitimizing Brazil’s attempts to secure a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

The second question has to do with the role of the left on the continent. It has been quick to change its mind. The case of Uruguay illustrates the point. In July 2004, when the Uruguayan senate was faced with the decision of whether to send troops to Haiti, then-Senator and current Chancellor Reinaldo Gargano emphatically opposed the deployment, supported by President Jorge Batlle: “The forces of peace will validate the usurpation of power and will confront dangerous situations.” Senator Eleuterio Fernandez Huidobro went further by comparing the situation in Haiti to that in Iraq. “The United States launches a war and later calls on the UN to come in and fix things. It is the same in Haiti. The United States foments the overthrow of Aristide and now it wants others to undo the damage.”<sup>7</sup>

#### Facts about Haiti

- Population: 9 million. Seventy-three percent live in extreme poverty: no access to sanitation, half without potable water, and limited access to electricity. Two thirds do not have food for a daily meal. One percent of the population, of European descent, owns half of the country’s wealth.
- Capital: Port-au-Prince
- Life expectancy: 53
- Mortality rate for children under 5: 125 per 1,000
- Children per woman: 4.2.
- Literacy: 49 %
- Doctors or medics per 100,000 people: 8
- Unemployment: 80 %
- Percentage of urban/rural population living on less than one dollar a day: 65/80.

Just one year later, the Uruguayan left in power chose to support the mission in Haiti and raise troop levels on the island. Only one representative, the socialist senior member Guillermo Chifflet, had the courage to renounce his seat before he would validate this humiliating turnabout with his vote.

What happened in Uruguay mimicked almost exactly what took place in other countries. There was no serious or genuine debate over the matter, and leftists and progressives offered only the excuse of a *fait accompli*, all

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the while knowing they had, in a short time, radically changed their positions, simply because they were in power.

The third issue is somewhat more complex. In mid-February 2007, the press distributed a photo of an African-American soldier threateningly holding his gun to the head of an African-American woman who was protesting the military action. It could have been a Brazilian soldier in Cité Soleil or somewhere else in Haiti. But it wasn't. It was a military operation in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, ostensibly launched to combat "gang members."

The pieces begin to fall into place. The occurrences led analyst Juan Gabriel Takatlian, of the University of San Andres, to ask about the mission in Haiti: "Is this a dress rehearsal for when the armed forces clamp down on drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro?"<sup>8</sup>

The common denominator is the war on the poor, camouflaged as a war on drugs and gangs, and in defense of democracy. Far from being a humanitarian mission, the presence of the blue helmets in Haiti is a political act with a political end: to silence the independent voices of Haiti, above all those in neighborhoods like Cité Soleil where Aristide's Lavalas party receives strong support.

The July 6, 2005 massacre was considered by the Haiti Information Project (HIP) to be "a preventive attack by the UN and Haiti's opulent elite to suffocate the impact of protests planned for the anniversary of Aristide's election, scheduled to take place nine days later, on July 15." The second massacre served a similar purpose. "Last December 16 we witnessed another outpouring of support for Aristide that began in Cité Soleil, and six days later the UN carried out a lethal attack, reported by residents and human rights groups to have killed a number of innocent victims."<sup>9</sup>

## Modifying the Political Map

The director of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, Brian Concannon, indicates, "It is difficult not to detect a relationship between the areas in Cité Soleil where large protests have taken place and the sites the UN has targeted for carrying out its military operations."<sup>10</sup> The punishment by UN troops has been extreme. Helicopters have destroyed water tanks and much of the population must now walk miles just to fill

up a bucket with water. According to HIP, the MINUSTAH has water trucks, but they give the water away to private speculators who turn around and resell it to the poor people who have no money to buy it. Despite the repression, last Feb. 7 more than 100,000 people protested in Haiti, demanding an end to MINUSTAH and the return of Aristide.<sup>11</sup> All indications are that the UN decided to use military force to modify the political map, having failed to do so while contributing to the environment of instability.

If the carnival celebration is any gauge of public opinion, it would seem the vast majority of Haitians resent the UN blue helmets. The most popular targets for taunting are the MINUSTAH and UN bureaucrats. And not without reason. In 2005, Nobel-prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel denounced the effort from Port-au-Prince, pointing out that the first year of the blue-helmet occupation resulted in 1,500 dead—an average of 20 a day.

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Several testimonies accuse the Brazilian armed forces of human rights violations. The Latin American coordinator of Service for Peace and Justice, Ana Juanche, says, "The MINUSTAH was here to consolidate the peace process, but instead it is schooling the police force, training and accompanying it in resolving cases of violence, repressing protest, and clearing out the dead from the neighborhoods. I have seen the arrogance with which the MINUSTAH soldiers roam the streets, running people off, blocking traffic just because they are passing through."<sup>12</sup>

The reasons behind this activity are revealing. "The presence of the UN is a form of humiliation, another opportunity denied the Haitians to determine their own destiny. There is a large percentage of the population that claims that the Haitian people were demanding Aristide's resignation, that he had lost popular support by sponsoring a string of serious human rights violations. It was the Haitians looking for a new path, and then when Aristide

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was on the verge of falling, in comes the United States to remove him. This sector believes it was denied its role as a legitimate political actor, and it considers the MINUS-TAH to be just another denial of its right to self-determination,” argues Juanche.

In the neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, like in the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo and the slums of Bogota and Medellin, a war is being waged on the poor. This war has no intention of overcoming poverty. Rather, it aims to prevent the poor from organizing and resisting.

Urban analyst Mike Davis, who has studied U.S. urban change in detail, argues that the slum peripheries have “also become the terrain of a lot of Pentagon thinking about urban warfare. These non-hierarchical, labyrinthine peripheries are what many Pentagon thinkers have fastened onto as one of the most challenging terrains for future wars and other imperial projects.”<sup>13</sup> In these peripheries, Davis continues, “This new poor, on the fringes of the city, have been organizing themselves massively over the last decade ... whether that’s Sadr, in Iraq, or an equivalent slum-based social movement in Buenos Aires.” If the Pentagon is obsessing now over urban architecture and planning, it is because it has bitterly learned that military superiority means nothing in these areas. The war on the poor is where the strategies of George W. Bush and some progressive governments have reached out to shake hands.

## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Guillermo Chifflet, “Guerra contra los pobres.”
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Radio Mundo Real.
- <sup>4</sup> Judith Scherr, “Horror en clave ONU,” published on Znet.
- <sup>5</sup> Guillermo Chifflet, ob. cit.
- <sup>6</sup> Raúl Zibechi, “Hacia las fuerzas armadas sudamericanas.”
- <sup>7</sup> Brecha, 4 de julio de 2004.
- <sup>8</sup> Juan Gabriel Tokatlán, “El desacierto de enviar tropas a Haití.”
- <sup>9</sup> Kevin Pina, [www.haitiacion.net](http://www.haitiacion.net).
- <sup>10</sup> José Luis Vivas, [www.rebelion.org](http://www.rebelion.org).
- <sup>11</sup> Prensa Latina, February 11.
- <sup>12</sup> Carolina Porley, “Un callejón sin aparente salida.”
- <sup>13</sup> Mike Davis, online at <http://bldgblog.blogspot.com/2006/05/interview-with-mike-davis-part-1.html>

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## ARTICLES FROM THE IRC AMERICAS PROGRAM

U.S. Congress Should Make New Year's Resolution for Haiti

<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3894>

IDB Debt Cancellation for Haiti

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/3768>

Instituto para la Justicia y la Democracia en Haití  
([www.ijdh.org](http://www.ijdh.org))

<http://www.ircamericas.org/esp/3689>

What is Brazil Doing in Haiti?

<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/945>

## RESOURCES

Carolina Porley, "Un callejón sin aparente salida," June 17, 2005, online at [www.brecha.com.uy](http://www.brecha.com.uy).

Guillermo Chifflet, "Guerra contra los pobres," January 26, 2007, online at [www.brecha.com.uy](http://www.brecha.com.uy).

José Luis Vivas, "La MINUSTAH, con un general brasileño al mando, busca justificar su prórroga," online at [www.rebelion.org](http://www.rebelion.org).

Juan Gabriel Tokatlián, "El desacierto de enviar tropas a Haití," June 13, 2004, *Página 12*, Buenos Aires.

Kevin Pina, "La verdad que la ONU calla acerca de las pandillas en Haití," Proyecto de Información de Haití (HIP) online at [www.haitiaction.net](http://www.haitiaction.net).

Mike Davis, "Los suburbios de las ciudades del tercer mundo son el nuevo escenario geopolítico decisivo," interview at [www.ladinamo.org](http://www.ladinamo.org).

MINUSTAH (Misión de las Naciones Unidas para la Estabilización de Haití): [www.minustah.org](http://www.minustah.org)

Raúl Zibechi, "Hacia las fuerzas armadas sudamericanas," December 2, 2006, *La Jornada*, México.

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