

Dear Colleagues,

Please find below the mainstream news on Haiti for March 14-21, 2007.

Haitian Finance Minister Daniel Dorsainvil announced at the IDB annual meeting that Haiti intends to use their IDB debt 'relief' on security improvements. "Dorsainvil told Reuters the presence of gangs that rape and kidnap citizens and battle United Nations peacekeepers meant the country needed to modernize its police force, build prisons and train judges." The Haitian government's priorities for debt relief contrast with programs addressing the root causes of Haitian poverty, as advocated for years by debt cancellation activists. Aid money is often and easily allocated for police or judicial training, roads and other infrastructure projects guaranteeing lucrative contracts for foreign companies, but aid (and long term investment) is generally lacking for education, healthcare, water and sanitation upgrades most vital to poverty alleviation. The government's stated priorities appear to be heavily influenced by foreign advisors seeking to keep the debt payments flowing north, to those countries with the security trainers and prison builders.

An AP/International Herald Tribune article featured Amnesty International's recent report detailing Dominican Republic government-sanctioned discrimination against Haitian migrants. The discrimination counters specific UN conventions and international court rulings such as the 2005 Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruling granting citizenship to Dominican-born children of Haitian migrants.

The BBC ran a story on Haiti's child slaves or 'restavecs'. The story corresponds with Britain's 200th anniversary of abolishing slavery. The BBC tells the sad tale of how too many Haitian children are sent by their poor parents from rural areas to relatives in the city to seek better opportunities but otherwise condemn them to abusive households. There are some support programs for urban restavecs, but as one IOM official stated, the real need is to improve conditions at the source: the livelihoods of rural people, build schools etc. to keep children with their families.

A Miami Herald article featured hip hop artist Wyclef Jean's visit to Congress on March 12th. Serving as roving ambassador for Haiti, Jean used his congressional appearance to promote immediate passage of the HOPE Act, road building for tourism and endorsement of a continued UN presence. Congresspersons were genuinely star struck with one congressman proclaiming "we need more people like you."

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- 1. Haiti to use debt relief payment for security**

By Mica Rosenberg

Reuters

March 19, 2007

<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/DHRV-6ZG96C?OpenDocument>

GUATEMALA CITY, March 19 (Reuters) - Gang-ravaged Haiti plans to spend a debt relief windfall on security improvements, despite pressure to use it to reduce poverty, the country's government said on Monday.

Haitian Finance Minister Daniel Dorsainvil told Reuters the presence of gangs that rape and kidnap citizens and battle United Nations peacekeepers meant the country needed to modernize its police force, build prisons and train judges.

"One of the key priorities of this year's budget will be security and strengthening the justice system," Dorsainvil said in an interview at the Inter-American Development Bank's annual meeting in Guatemala.

The Washington-based lender has agreed to write off about \$525 million of the country's debt by 2009, citing Haiti's position as the poorest country in the Americas.

Haiti, which is part of a broader global debt relief program being managed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, will receive interim debt relief of \$20 million over the next two years.

Lobbying groups, many gathered in Guatemala, are pressuring the Haitian government to make sure the relief helps the poorest people in the country who do not have access to clean water, medicines and proper food.

Dorsainvil defended the security plans, saying the government would need to fund police training from its annual budget whether it had the debt relief or not.

"The debt relief is budget support," he said.

The government of President Rene Preval, elected just over a year ago amid widespread hopes that he could bridge the divide between the poor and a wealthy elite -- and also end crime -- has made ending violence a primary goal.

Dorsainvil said Haiti plans to double the size of its police force to 14,000 to tackle the gangs that have moved from the cities to rural areas, terrifying small towns and villages.

Doctors and aid workers estimate that more than 800 women were raped between February 2006 and February 2007 in Haiti's capital.

2. Amnesty International: Dominican Republic violates international law with abuse of Haitians

The Associated Press

March 21, 2007

International Herald Tribune

<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/03/21/news/CB-GEN-Dominican-Haiti-Migrant-Abuse.php>

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic: A major human rights group on Wednesday accused the Dominican Republic of systematically mistreating Haitian migrants who cross the border fleeing violence and seeking economic opportunity.

In a 58-page report, Amnesty International said immigration raids and government-sanctioned discrimination against Haitian migrants, many of whom are illegal, violated both United Nations conventions and international court rulings.

The Dominican foreign ministry declined comment, saying government officials were still reviewing the London-based group's findings.

Haitians in the neighboring Dominican Republic face discrimination, violence from private citizens and authorities and deportation without trial, according to the group's report, which was written by two investigators who visited the capital of Santo Domingo, border towns and migrant settlements last year.

An estimated 500,000 to 1 million ethnic Haitians live in the Dominican Republic, many in isolated slums. The two nations share the island of Hispaniola, and tense relations over the 362-kilometer (225-mile) border have often erupted in violence.

Though the migration issues stretch back generations and have been the subject of court cases and diplomatic efforts, the rights group hopes its findings will spur action by the Dominican government, other countries and bodies like the Organization of American States.

Gerardo Ducos, Amnesty International researcher on Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, said Haitian migrants help their eastern neighbor's economy by doing jobs Dominicans shun, such as the backbreaking labor of cutting sugarcane.

"The government and Dominican society fail to recognize the contribution of the Haitian labor force to the economy of the country," Ducos said at a news conference.

Haiti has been plagued by poverty, violence and political instability and Haitian migrants see the Dominican Republic, with a population of 9.2 million, as a comparative land of opportunity — even though many are exploited as cheap labor in agriculture and construction.

Amnesty investigators called for careful legal deportation procedures to replace mass repatriations of Haitians, which they say round up as many as 30,000 people each year in raids so swift and indiscriminate they sometimes ensnare darker-skinned Dominican nationals.

The report alleges some of the worst abuses occurred during a 2005 operation, when immigration police rounded up 2,000 people following the killing of a shopkeeper, allegedly by two Haitian migrants.

Migrants reported being packed into trucks and vans, separated from their families and robbed of money, cell phones and other items before being driven hours without food or water to the border. President Leonel Fernandez condemned the police actions at the time.

The Amnesty report also urged the Dominican government to comply with a 2005 ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to grant citizenship to the Dominican-born children of Haitian migrants who are often classified as "foreigners in transit."

Fernandez recently said he has no intention of changing the policy.

3. Haiti's hidden 'child slaves'

By Nick Caistor

Port-au-Prince, Haiti

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/6451267.stm>

March 20, 2007

Haiti was the first country in the Americas to abolish slavery, when it won its independence in 1804 after a struggle led by Toussaint Louverture. But thousands live a life of near-slave labour because of poverty and social breakdown.

Most Haitians live on less than 50 US cents (£0.25) a day
Jeanette is walking up a hill in Petionville, a district in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince. She is carrying a huge blue drum full of water on her head. Jeanette is only six, but has to walk 4km (2.4 miles) every day to get the water from the public standpipe.

Jeanette was born in the countryside outside the small town of Hinche in the north of the country. Her parents are among the poorest of the poor in this country where more than half the population of 9m lives on less than 50 US cents (£0.25) a day.

Her father one day told her she was going to stay with (French: rester avec) distant relatives in the Haitian capital. Ever since, Jeanette has become one of the estimated 250,000 children used as near-slave labour in Haiti.

"They are treated as less than cats and dogs," says Soeur Marthe, a Belgian nun who has been working with the restavecs for several years now.

"Their families have nothing to offer them, so they almost give them away."

We are deceiving ourselves if we say this is some kind of national tradition. This is child slavery pure and simple

Margarett Lubin, IOM

Most of the children are employed as domestic servants, and often one of their main tasks is to get water for the households in the city.

Less than a quarter of Port-au-Prince dwellings have running water on the property: everyone else has to fetch it from public stand-pipes and fountains, often kilometres away.

So Jeanette is dispatched each morning and evening to secure this precious cargo. She also looks after the other children in the family, cleans the house, and does all the laundry.

No documents

What she does not do is go to school, have time to play with friends, or dare to hope that she will find proper employment one day.

A monument marks Haiti's historical rejection of slavery

Some local human rights groups are fighting to improve their situation. Prosperity Raymond works with the Maurice Sixto centres which have opened in Port-au-Prince to try to give the restavecs some schooling, proper food, and a sense that they too have rights.

"The big problem for them is that they have no official existence," says Raymond.

"They often don't have a birth certificate, or any proof of who they are, and this makes them even more vulnerable to exploitation.

"We try to establish their identity, to get them into schools so that they can pass exams and get out of the dreadful situation they find themselves in."

This situation is often even worse when the restavecs reach the age of 15.

This is when by law they must be paid to work; and it is then that the families either throw them out on the street or force them to continue as unpaid domestics.

'Slavery pure and simple'

Until recently, the Haitian government did not acknowledge the scale of the restavec problem. Some officials still argue that this is the traditional way for poor rural families to help their children get on.

But as Margaret Lubin, who works with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Port-au-Prince, says:

"We are deceiving ourselves if we say this is some kind of national tradition. This is child slavery pure and simple."

Ms Lubin says that, according to Unicef, the numbers involved have doubled in recent years, as poverty and political instability in the countryside have become even worse.

She also points to an increasing traffic in children across the border that Haiti shares with the Dominican Republic in the east of the island.

"Because economic conditions are better there, some Haitian parents think they are helping their children get on if they are handed over to agents who ferry them across the border," she says.

"But those kids have no rights at all in the Dominican Republic, and they are often abused."

Although care for the restavecs in the cities is important, Ms Lubin thinks the only solution is to go to the root of the problem, out in the Haitian countryside:

"We need to show the poorest families that they have a duty to look after their children - and we need to build schools in the countryside, so that they have something to stay for."

4. Jean raps Haiti message to Congress

Hip-hop star Wyclef Jean used rap as he pitched for his native Haiti in Congress.

BY PABLO BACHELET

Miami Herald

March 14, 2007

<http://www.miamiherald.com/582/story/40915.html>

WASHINGTON -- Hip-hop star Wyclef Jean took to a different kind of stage Tuesday, addressing a small audience that could make a big difference to his native Haiti.

He said the halls of Congress were as intimidating as Carnegie Hall.

Then, he slipped into the easy cadence of the world-renowned musician that he is, and the members of the Western Hemisphere subcommittee of the House Foreign Relations Committee were treated to passages of rap as Jean gently tapped the table for rhythm.

His rap, during a subcommittee hearing on Haiti's development needs, recounted the country's grim statistics, how only 52 percent of Haiti's children go to school.

But he also spoke of hope.

"For the first time in my life," he said, "I see political parties trying to work together hand in hand."

Jean, Haiti's best-known musician, was also all-business as he checked his notes to hit the main points: His country needs help in education, tourism, using arts for development and, above all, engaging the Haitian diaspora to invest more in their home country.

"I challenge the Haitians first," he said.

He asked lawmakers to push the Bush administration to quickly enact the Hope Act, a law that allows Haiti to export more textiles to the United States. It passed Congress last year but still needs to pass some bureaucratic hurdles. This, he said, was a "signal" that investors needed to spend more money in Haiti.

The preacher's son, who went on to become a member of the Grammy-winning Fugees, concluded with a poetic touch. "To live for yourself is to live selfishly," he told lawmakers, "but to live for others is to live eternally."

Congress members were falling over themselves to praise the 36-year-old founder of Yéle Haiti, a nonprofit group that uses music to bring development to Haiti.

"We need more people like you; you are an example," said New Jersey Democratic Rep. Donald Payne.

"Sometimes we have trouble getting attendance, but since you're here, everyone wants to come," said New York Democratic Rep. Eliot Engel, noting the large number of legislators present.

Jean testified alone. The top Latin American official of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Adolfo Franco, a man who determines the fate of millions of dollars in assistance, was relegated to a second panel.

Jean fielded queries that went from biofuels to complaints that the Dominican Republic abuses Haitian migrants.

The hip-hop artist said he's trying to organize a big bridge-building concert in the Dominican Republic, using what he called "celebritarianism" to soothe tensions.

"Wherever there is tension, we need to create awareness," he said.

He called the presence of the U.N. peacekeeping force in Haiti a "must" and criticized rampant corruption at the country's ports as a damper on investment. When asked about infrastructure, he said the country needed roads to promising tourism spots.

"My gosh, you've got some great ideas," marveled Indiana Republican Rep. Dan Burton.

Before testifying, Jean was asked by reporters how he felt about going before a congressional panel for the first time. Performing on stage was easy, he said, ``but I always get nervous when I'm talking."

Elegantly decked out in a pinstriped suit and a yellow cashmere sweater, he was asked how he felt about wearing a tie. "What we've learned in hip-hop growing up is, if I'm 36, I can't act like I'm 21," he said, adding that ``my mother would smack the hell of out of me if I were to show up in front of Congress with some . . . jeans."