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HAITI

Provide justice, not charity

By Brian Concannon Jr.
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When international diplomats and financiers convene Tuesday in Port-au-Prince to discuss development assistance with Haiti's newly elected government, the one issue certain to be off limits is the one certain solution to Haiti's grinding poverty: repayment of the "independence debt" that France illegally extorted from Haiti in 1825. The crushing burden imposed by that debt -- over \$21 billion in today's dollars -- is the principle historic cause of Haiti's underdevelopment, and is directly responsible for today's grinding poverty in Haiti.

Haiti's history is remarkable. In 1804, Haiti became only the second independent country in the Americas, the world's first "black republic" and the only nation in history born of a successful slave revolt.

Haitians won their independence by beating the French army in a bloody 12-year war, but European countries and the United States forced them to pay a second price to gain entry to the international community. The world powers refused to recognize Haiti's independence, while France posted warships off her coast, threatening invasion and the reinstatement of slavery. After 21 years of fighting this isolation, Haiti succumbed to France's unjust terms in 1825. In exchange for diplomatic recognition, Haiti agreed to take out a loan from a designated French bank and pay compensation to

French plantation owners for their loss of "property," including the freed slaves.

The amount of the debt, 150 million French francs, was 10 times that of Haiti's total 1825 revenue and twice the price paid in 1803 by the United States to France for the Louisiana Purchase, some 74 times more land.

This imposition of compensation by a defeated power and reimbursement by freed slaves of their former owners is unique in history and violated international law even in 1825. The agreement began a cycle of debt that has condemned the Haitian people to poverty ever since. Haiti did not finish paying the loans that financed the debt until 1947. Over a century after the global slave trade was recognized and eliminated as the evil it was, the Haitians were still paying their ancestors' masters for their freedom. The crippling legacy of debt begun in 1825 has stifled Haitian development ever since.

The government could not invest in education, health care or infrastructure projects because all available funds went overseas. In 1915, for example, 80 percent of government revenues went to debt service. The need for hard currency forced Haitian farmers to favor financially or environmentally risky cash crops such as coffee and hardwood, rather than development of

a diverse national economy. Over-farming and over-logging led, in turn, to catastrophic deforestation and soil erosion, which put more pressure on the remaining arable land.

Economic instability has engendered political instability: Haiti has been beset by dozens of coups, rebellions, foreign military interventions and a cycle of violence that paralleled the country's downward economic spiral. Today Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with 80 percent of its people living below the poverty line, and is ranked 153rd out of 177 on the U.N. Human Development Index, far behind all of its Caribbean neighbors.

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The \$21 billion, in current terms, that France extorted illegally, and therefore owes Haiti, dwarfs the aid packages being debated in Port-au-Prince this week. Unlike loans and other foreign assistance, a just repayment of the independence debt would not extend dependence on foreign aid, and would allow the people of Haiti to develop their country as they, not the international community, think best.

If the international community were serious about lifting Haiti out of its desperate poverty, repaying the independence debt would be at the top of the agenda, not off the table.