

Haiti: the forgotten milestone in Bush's crusade for "freedom"

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Dozens of Haitian men, women and children drowned when their rickety homemade craft went down in the waters of the Caribbean, the Associated Press reported Thursday. Some 50 people had crowded onto the boat, which sank under their weight.

Three survivors made it ashore to tell of the disaster, while officials reported recovering nine bodies, which were buried in a mass grave. "There's nothing we can do," said Cap-Haitien Mayor Apile Fleurent. "We're just waiting to see how many bodies are brought in by the waves."

While the victims were in all likelihood trying to reach the United States, their deaths passed unnoticed in the American media. They were only a relative handful among the thousands of refugees attempting to flee the island nation, an exodus that has grown dramatically in the year since the Bush administration orchestrated a coup that overthrew the country's elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Their deaths represented, moreover, only a fraction of the daily toll that political violence, disease and hunger wreak upon the Haitian people.

The anniversary of Washington's "liberation" of Haiti came and went at the end of last month—also with little notice from the US media. In the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, masked cops fired tear gas and then live ammunition into a February 28 march of several thousand demanding Aristide's return. When the shooting stopped, three lay dead and several more were severely wounded.

The incident was part of a wave of killing that has continued throughout the country over the past year, escalating around the anniversary of the coup. Large parts of Haiti remain under the control of right-wing ex-army thugs whose rampage last year set the stage for the US military intervention. These forces kill, torture and rape with impunity.

In the capital and its surrounding area, the killing and repression are carried out by a combination of local forces and United Nations troops. The UN came to Washington's aid last summer, providing military units from Brazil, Uruguay, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and other countries to replace the Marines, who were badly needed to suppress resistance to the US occupation of Iraq. Haitian government security forces are augmented by privately funded death squads that operate

unhindered in pro-Aristide slums like Cité Soleil, Cité de Dieu, Bel Air and La Saline.

An "inhuman horror" is the way a recent report issued by the University of Miami's Center for Human Rights describes the situation since the US intervention last year. The report provides ample information as well as appalling photographic evidence to back up this assessment. http://www.law.miami.edu/cshr/CSHR_Report_02082005_v2.pdf

"Summary executions are a police tactic, and even well-meaning officers treat poor neighborhoods seeking a democratic voice as enemy territory where they must kill or be killed," the report states. "Haiti's brutal and disbanded army has returned to join the fray. Suspected dissidents fill the prisons, their constitutional rights ignored.... UN police and soldiers, unable to speak the language of most Haitians, are overwhelmed by the firestorm. Unable to communicate with the police, they resort to heavy-handed incursions into the poorest neighborhoods that force intermittent peace at the expense of innocent residents.

"The injured prefer to die at home rather than risk arrest at the hospital. Those who reach the hospital soak in puddles of their own blood, ignored by doctors. Not even death ends the tragedy: bodies pile in the morgue, quickly devoured out of recognition by maggots."

The report cites the activities of a death squad armed and funded by the country's wealthiest businessmen, including Andy Apaid, the factory owner and US citizen who played a central role in preparing the coup against Aristide. The squad's leader, Thomas Robinson, alias "Labanye," operates with the full protection of the police in terrorizing the sprawling Cité Soleil shantytown.

Citing multiple sources, the report states, "Labanye has a large United States flag draped in front of his headquarters under which he forces victims to kneel and beg for their lives before killing them."

Those luckier than the refugees who drowned off the Haitian coast this week face fresh persecution upon landing on US soil.

A case in point is that of 81-year-old Joseph Danticat, a Baptist minister and uncle of the well-known Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat. After facing death threats, he flew to

the US with his son, both of whom had valid passports and visas. When they asked for temporary asylum at Miami International Airport, they were taken into custody by Homeland Security and thrown into the Krome detention camp. There, the frail and elderly man was held as a national security risk, denied access to his family or lawyers and deprived of his medicine. Within four days he was dead.

Meanwhile, the US Justice Department and—at least until now—the courts have rejected appeals for asylum despite the petitioners’ well-substantiated claims that they will be tortured if returned to Haiti. As a March 11 *New York Times* article on the case of Napoleon Bonaparte Auguste made clear, the US government has rationalized that, in subjecting prisoners to beatings, burns and electric shocks—not to mention inhuman overcrowding in its jails—the Haitian regime is not “intentionally” torturing them, but merely fighting crime.

“All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know the United States will not ignore your oppression or excuse your oppressors,” George W. Bush declared at his second inauguration last January. As he spoke, killers paid by US businessmen and protected by a US-installed puppet regime were summarily executing Haitian workers and youth beneath the Stars and Stripes, and Haitian refugees were languishing in the Krome detention camp waiting to be shipped back to these same killers or die behind bars in the US itself.

Haiti today provides one of the best vantage points for understanding the Bush administration’s worldwide crusade for “democracy” against tyranny. This is a country where Washington succeeded in toppling a government it disliked and bringing to power one that is indisputably “Made in the USA.”

The overthrow of Aristide was a US operation from start to finish. The Bush administration hated the former priest, both because of his association with the movement that brought down the US-backed Duvalier dictatorship and his failure to fully implement IMF-dictated austerity measures. No amount of genuflection toward Washington on Aristide’s part could change this attitude.

The Bush administration subjected the country—where the majority of the population is unemployed and subsists on \$1 or less a day—to cruel economic sanctions. While denying any aid, it poured millions of dollars into an effort mounted by US government bureaus like the Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy, as well as their private contractors, to foment anti-government protests. Several of those who were hired locally for this purpose have since been rewarded with cabinet posts.

Meanwhile, it provided covert backing to armed terrorists who invaded the country from the neighboring Dominican Republic. Led by former Haitian army officials and long-time “assets” of the CIA, these gunmen killed hundreds in their march on Port-au-Prince.

CIA “counter-terrorism” operatives then kidnapped Aristide, hustling him onto a plane bound for Africa. Washington’s

apologists dispute the kidnapping charge, claiming that the CIA agents merely offered Aristide a choice—“leave or stay—live or die”—and that he made his own decision.

Today, Haiti is ostensibly ruled by a government headed by Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, a former UN official who was brought back from Florida after living for decades out of the country. His government consists of fellow rightists and veterans of previous military regimes and the Duvalier dictatorship. The real power, however, rests with wealthy businessmen like Andy Apaid and the gunmen they pay.

This collection of reactionaries and assassins had no chance of winning a fair election, which is why Washington targeted the elected Aristide regime as a “tyranny” from which the people were to be “liberated.”

The culmination of this exercise is supposed to take place at the end of this year with the holding of “free elections.” Key leaders of the party that won the overwhelming majority of the vote in the last election—Aristide’s Fanmi Lavalas (FL)—remain imprisoned without charges. Hundreds of their followers have been jailed or murdered by the death squads.

The election itself will be organized by the same US officials and contractors who orchestrated the political destabilization campaign that culminated in Aristide’s ouster and the landing of US Marines.

Haiti is a small country of just 8 million people, intensely poor and just a few hundred miles off the US coast. Here, more than anywhere else, one can see the unadulterated impact of US imperialism’s power—imposed over a century of military interventions, occupations and political strong-arming.

With its death squads, political prisoners and abject poverty, it stands as a showcase for Bush’s crusade for freedom. Anyone harboring illusions about Washington’s aims in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Iran should turn their eyes to Haiti to see the real face of American imperialism’s “democratizing” mission.



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