

Haiti: Thousands protest over growing hunger

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5 April 2008

Thousands of Haitians took to the streets Thursday to protest against soaring food prices and growing hunger in the Western Hemisphere's poorest country.

In Les Cayes, Haiti's third-largest city, over 5,000 people demonstrated, chanting slogans denouncing President Rene Preval and shouting "Down with the high cost of living!"

According to local reports from the southern peninsula city, the protesters stormed and attempted to burn the local offices of the UN Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti (MINUSTAH). This United Nations "peacekeeping" force occupied the country after Washington orchestrated the violent overthrow of Haiti's elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and sent in US Marines four years ago.

Some of the demonstrators barricaded the streets with burning tires and sacked food supplies. According to one source, eight people were wounded when soldiers opened fire on the crowd. Schools, stores and banks in Les Cayes were forced to shut down because of the clashes.

Demonstrations against the soaring cost of living were also reported in other parts of southern Haiti and in the northern city of Gonaives, Haiti's fourth largest. These protests have been building steadily. According to statistics kept by the UN mission, there were 164 such demonstrations in the six months leading up to last August and 258 in the subsequent six months.

MINUSTAH issued a statement condemning the recent demonstration in Les Cayes. "Acts of violence, whatever they may be," the UN occupation force warned, "can only hinder efforts of the Haitian authorities in their struggle to improve living conditions of the population."

The statement continued by vowing that MINUSTAH "will continue to support the Haitian National Police

throughout the country and particularly in its efforts to restore calm in Les Cayes" and that those responsible for attacking the Les Cayes headquarters would be prosecuted. The UN force sent an additional 100 troops to the city to suppress any continuing upheavals.

Fully 80 percent of Haitians survive on \$2 or less a day, while half of the country's 8.5 million people subsist on the edge of starvation with less than a dollar a day. One out of every four children in Haiti is malnourished.

As was widely reported in the media earlier this year, things have become so difficult for the masses of poor that many Haitians in impoverished areas like the massive Cité Soleil slum of Port au Prince have resorted to eating "dirt cookies," made from salt, oil and clay and baked in the sun.

The minimum wage in Haiti—which applies only to the fraction of the population that is employed in the formal economy—stands at 70 gourdes (\$1.90) a day. While the country's unions called for an increase to 200 gourdes (\$5.50), the government of President Preval has sought a "compromise" with the Haitian ruling elite and foreign multinationals by proposing a 100 gourdes (\$2.75) daily minimum wage. Critics have warned that this amount is totally inadequate to meet minimal requirements of life.

Even sections of the Haitian bourgeoisie have voiced fears that the desperate conditions of life prevailing in the country will make the population ungovernable. "Poverty, unemployment, hunger are part of everyday life for Haitians, while private and public elites of the country continue to show irresponsibility," said Pierre Leger, the president of the Chamber of Commerce of southern Haiti, who believes that the increase is insufficient. "Hunger ... breeds rebellion," the businessman warned.

Two years after his election to the presidency, Preval has faced increasing opposition from Haitian workers and the poor because of his failure to adopt measures to alleviate hunger and plummeting living standards. Speaking to the Haitian Chamber of Deputies in February, Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis insisted that there was no “quick fix” to Haiti’s food crisis, which he said was driven by global forces, including the high cost of oil.

Instead, the government has pursued policies of privatization, and free trade that have enriched a small elite, while continuing to pay off the massive foreign debts—to the tune of \$1 million a week—incurred during three decades of rule by the US-backed dictatorship of Francois and Jean-Claude Duvalier.

Presiding over the immense social tensions created by these policies and the prevailing conditions of life is the 9,000-strong UN military and police force, under the command of the Brazilian military, with other units drawn mainly from Uruguay, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Jordan, Argentina and Chile.

The MINUSTAH forces, which are heavily armed and backed by tanks, helicopters and armored cars, have launched a new anti-crime crackdown, ostensibly prompted by a recent sharp increase in the number of kidnappings. This has meant increased roadblocks and checkpoints as well as raids within the slums inhabited by Haiti’s poor.

The UN admitted in a statement issued late last month that its efforts have been “stifled by an increasingly dissident population.” It appealed for “the population’s support so that its blue helmets can help ensure public safety and security.”

Increasingly, however, the UN troops have been seen as an occupation force, whose mission is to protect Haiti’s few “haves” from the masses of “have-nots.” The raids that they conduct together with Haitian police have sent thousands of young Haitians into overcrowded and miserable prisons, where they are held without trials or even charges.

The events in Haiti are part of a wave of protests and upheavals that have swept the globe in response to rising food prices and shortages. Food protests and riots have been reported in the past few months in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Egypt, Guinea, Indonesia, Mauritania, Mexico, Morocco, Senegal, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

As of last December, the UN’s Food and Agriculture

Organization (FAO) listed 37 countries facing food crises and found that 20 had imposed food-price controls. Many countries producing rice and other commodities have imposed export restrictions to avoid domestic shortages, driving up prices on the world market even further.

According to the FAO, food costs worldwide soared by 23 percent between 2006 and 2007, with grains going up 42 percent, oils 50 percent and dairy 80 percent. In addition to the skyrocketing price of oil, the crisis is driven by increasing speculation in basic foodstuffs on the global market and the universal instability created by the deepening crisis of finance capital in the US.

Together, these international economic forces driving the growth of hunger are making it increasingly impossible for masses of working people in country after country to tolerate the existing social order.



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