

Mass protests greet Sarkozy visit to Haiti

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy traveled for a one-day visit to Haiti on February 17, amid rising popular opposition to the Western-backed Préval government and international tensions over how to rebuild the country. The US military occupied Haiti after the devastating January 12 earthquake that killed over 200,000 people, wounded over 250,000, and destroyed much of the country's infrastructure.

Sarkozy, the first French head of state ever to visit Haiti, was greeted with street protests by thousands of Haitians demanding the return of elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Ousted by a US- and French-backed coup in 2004, Aristide was flown to the Central African Republic, a former French colony. Aristide now lives in exile in South Africa. President René Préval, a former prime minister under Aristide in the 1990s, came to power in 2006 in elections supervised by the provisional government of Boniface Alexandre that was installed by the coup.

Préval tried to address the crowd outside the presidential palace. However, crowds shouted him down, and Préval left in a luxury Jeep, surrounded by bodyguards.

Protesters held pictures of Aristide aloft and demanded that Sarkozy repay \$21 billion paid to France by Haiti, a former French slave colony. In 1825 warships under the orders of France's King Charles X—soon to be toppled by the 1830 revolution—forced Haiti to repay 90 million gold francs in exchange for its freedom. In 1794 France's revolutionary government had acknowledged the overthrow of slavery in Haiti by the slave army under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture. The armed ex-slaves repulsed Napoleon's military expedition of 1803, which aimed to restore them to slavery, and subsequently declared the independence of Haiti in 1804.

The ransom paid to Charles X, the equivalent of \$21.7 billion today, devastated Haiti's economy and took 122 years to repay. In comparison, it is estimated that the post-earthquake reconstruction of Haiti will cost \$14 billion—which is also less than the cost of one year of the upper-class tax cut Sarkozy pushed through upon coming to office in 2007.

Sarkozy's visit came amid steps to transform Haiti into a military dictatorship jointly run with foreign occupation forces and aid agencies. Haiti's legislative elections, previously scheduled for February 28-March 3, have been indefinitely postponed.

The US in particular is preparing to take over the Haitian

government. On February 11 the *Miami Herald* reported that the US State Department had presented top Haitian officials with plans for an Interim Haiti Recovery Commission in early February. The *Herald*, which had seen a copy of the plan, noted the commission's "top priority" is to "create a Haitian Development Authority to plan and coordinate billions in foreign assistance for at least 10 years."

The *Herald* wrote that the commission would be co-chaired by the Haitian prime minister and "a distinguished senior international figure engaged in the recovery effort." The *Herald* suggested that this figure would probably be former President Bill Clinton, a recent US envoy to Haiti and the husband of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Trinity Washington University professor Robert Maguire, who spoke positively about the plan, told the *Herald* it sounded "similar to an idea that Hillary Clinton was considering long before the earthquake."

The US plan has provoked opposition from capitalist powers who do not want such an obvious US role in reconstruction plans. The Canadian government is considering a plan to funnel aid into a trust fund that would be overseen by the World Bank.

US economist Jeffrey Sachs, who has devised a similar plan involving the Inter-American Development Bank, criticized the US State Department plan: "We should not see this as a US political effort but a multilateral one." Arguing that responsibility for reconstruction plans should fall to the Haitian government alone, Sachs said a reconstruction agency "shouldn't have a mixed membership of the [Haitian] president and international figures."

Initial details of what such "reconstruction" plans entail emerged after a January 25 conference in Montreal. They involve using a sub-minimum wage passed by Préval for the garment industry (\$2.98 per day) to turn Haiti into a super-exploited export-processing zone. In a UN report, Paul Collier of Britain's Oxford University wrote: "Due to its poverty and relatively unregulated labor market, Haiti has labor costs that are fully competitive with China, which is the global benchmark."

Sarkozy arrived in Haiti amidst speculation that his visit reflected growing divisions between Paris and Washington on how to proceed. Sarkozy arrived at Port-au-Prince airport, took a brief helicopter tour of the worst damaged areas of the city, and gave a press conference with Préval.

Sarkozy's performance was a mixture of cynicism and imperialist arrogance. Speaking to the puppet government of a US-occupied country, he said: "The people of Haiti are standing up! ... Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, Ministers, you must set the conditions for a national consensus on which to base a national project that will belong to you. Haiti for the Haitians."

He announced an aid package of €326 million (\$447 million), including €56 million for repaying Haiti's currently outstanding debts to France. Even though this sum is all out of proportion to the vast cost of rebuilding Haiti, Sarkozy lectured: "If I may say so, Mr. President, please do not rebuild the way it was before."

After admonishing the Préval regime that "Wealth must profit for everyone," Sarkozy made a remarkable admission: "In my country as in yours, the question of the extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of small number of people is a problem."

As he pushes for a new round of pension cuts in France and maintains the tax cut for the wealthy, this problem is one that his own policies play a major role in exacerbating.

Sarkozy also implicitly criticized the US State Department's plans, saying: "France does not want international tutelage for Haiti—especially when you are one of the world's poorest countries, that you have just undergone one of the world's most violent catastrophes."

Asked about rivalries between the countries active in rebuilding Haiti, Sarkozy pointed to fears of growing political opposition in Haiti: "First of all there should be no rivalries inside Haiti." He said, "I'm aware of your political realities—30 or so constitutions, a large number of assassinated heads of state ... one of the most abominable dictatorships the world has ever known."

Sarkozy failed to mention that after his ouster in 1986, dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier fled to France, where he lived a life of luxury despite never formally receiving political asylum. In 1998 the French government refused to act on a lawsuit demanding that France expel Duvalier as an illegal immigrant.

Sarkozy continued, "As for rivalries between the countries that are friends of Haiti ... there will be none. The Americans have done good work. They have a million Haitian [immigrants] and they are 900 km away, and I will not reproach anyone for not doing enough. Afterwards, in any emergency situation one can do things more or less well, provoke small tensions. It's not serious compared to the essential—which is that Americans, Englishmen, Brazilians, Canadians, and everyone else, we continue to work hand-in-hand to help you."

This statement repudiates widespread criticism from aid officials of the US military occupation's callous indifference towards Haitian lives. The US military seized the Port-au-Prince airport and blocked the arrival of humanitarian flights, costing the lives of thousands of Haitians dying from infected wounds and lack of antibiotics and other basic supplies. It also

refused to admit wounded Haitians to the large sick bay of the USS Carl Vinson, a US aircraft carrier steaming off Haiti, and temporarily blocked rescue flights to Florida.

Sarkozy bluntly refused to consider reimbursing the \$21 billion France extorted from Haiti in 1825, responding: "I've decided to reimburse Haiti's debts towards France. ... I presume that this creates the conditions for greater cooperation between our countries."

Asked if France might give more assistance in light of the \$14 billion cost of rebuilding Haiti, Sarkozy said: "We cannot condemn Haiti to a life on social assistance and kill the emergence of a private sector."

After Sarkozy had spoken, Préval took questions on the holding of future elections. He said the government faced difficulties in "purging" voter lists to "avoid fraud arising from dead voters." Ghoulishly, he explained that the earthquake made this virtually impossible: "Today, there are far more dead, there are far more displaced, there are far more potential voters who have lost their voting cards."

Préval also implied that he did not want to hold elections, given the popular mood: "And there is the question of the population's disposition—in this difficult situation, can one decently tell them, we're going to the elections right away?"

Asked whether December's scheduled presidential elections would take place on time, Préval implied that they were put on hold indefinitely, pending discussions with the occupying powers: "We will have to find an adequate, exceptional mechanism to allow these elections to take place."

He continued: "By consensus among the political class, civil society, and the international community that largely finances these elections, we should be able to find a formula that would allow there to be parliamentary, local and presidential elections. That is all I can say."



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