

What's happening in Haiti?

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The news from Haiti is grim but thanks to the media mob we know how many planes have landed today, how many litres of water were distributed and how many tents pitched. However the information experts have failed to answer one important question-How did a country with a thriving economy and a proud people turn into a country where government is invisible and the economy in ruins? In the 18th century Haiti was the world's richest colony where half a million slaves worked the sugar, coffee and cotton trade, providing one third of France's income. Haiti was not a poor country. In 1791 a successful slave rebellion defeated the French and created the first free republic of the Americas. Haiti was isolated by other nations fearful that the idea of liberation might prove contagious. The people turned to small scale farming, insuring food with dignity. The French never forgave the uppity slaves and under threat of immediate and terrible war, the colonial power exacted revenge. The people of Haiti were forced to pay an indemnity of 150 million francs which accounted for 80% of government income. Even before Haiti had crawled out from under the weight of French imperialism, the USA had marched right in with an even greater sense of purpose, sending troops to occupy the country in 1915. The US had just completed the Panama Canal and seized a corner of Cuba where they installed a naval base at Guantanamo. In Haiti the US military imposed the corvee (forced labour) until riots forced them to withdraw. Before they departed they trained a pro-American National Guard to subdue dissent. From 1957 to 1986 local tyrant and US puppet, Papa Doc Duvalier (succeeded by his son Baby Doc) ruled with an iron fist, opening the country's doors to sweatshops and banks which issued loans, knowing the cash would be dispatched to Swiss bank accounts. In July 2003, Haiti sent more than 90 per cent of all its foreign reserves to Washington to pay off these arrears. Haiti is not a poor country.

Popular pressure put an end to the Duvalier dynasty and democratic elections were held in 1990. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former priest in a poor parish, put his name on the ballot and swept into office with 67% of the vote. Aristide electrified the country, inviting the majority poor to share the country's wealth. He organized the first rubbish collection and the first government unit to tackle violence against women. Aristide also disbanded the army, a step too far for the wealthy elite which feared it would lose its historic privileges. The new president then tackled the French, demanding repayment of the illegal indemnity, "*so that we can build primary schools, primary healthcare, water systems and roads*". Aristide calculated the amount, added interest and adjusted for inflation, reaching a figure of \$21 billion dollars. Aristide was ousted in a military coup and blood once more ran freely in the streets of Port-Au-Prince. The country's political system has never recovered and recent elections have become a deadly tug of war over Aristide's right to govern. In 1986 the US government 'persuaded' the Haitians to remove tariffs on rice, ruining the country's farmers. By 2007 Haiti imported 75% of its rice. The agricultural collapse triggered an exodus to the capital city, where the population (100,000 in 1915), swelled to nearly three million, sowing the seeds for the massive loss of life in the recent earthquake. Haiti is not a poor country-it is a country which has been brought to its knees by the combined power of French and US political, economic and military might. In nearby Cuba, the health system is better than that of most EU countries, the elderly enjoy retirement with benefits and disaster response is exemplary. When the media circus

departs and foreign aid dries up, Haiti needs to look to Cuba and other Latin American neighbours for a sustainable recovery plan.