

# MEDIA ALERT: BRINGING HELL TO HAITI - PART 2

MEDIA LENS: Correcting for the distorted vision of the corporate media

March 2, 2004

Killing Hope

Jean-Bertrand Aristide told the Associated Press yesterday that he was forced to leave Haiti by US military forces. Asked if he left on his own, Aristide answered:

"No. I was forced to leave. Agents were telling me that if I don't leave they would start shooting and killing in a matter of time." (Elliott C. McLaughlin, Associated Press, March 1, 2004)

"Haiti, again, is ablaze", Jeffrey Sachs, professor of economics at Columbia University, writes: "Almost nobody, however, understands that today's chaos was made in Washington – deliberately, cynically, and steadfastly. History will bear this out." (Sachs, 'Fanning the flames of political chaos in Haiti', The Nation, February 28, 2004)

As Sachs argues, the Bush Administration has been pursuing policies likely to topple Aristide since 2001:

"I visited President Aristide in Port-au-Prince in early 2001. He impressed me as intelligent and intent on good relations with Haiti's private sector and the US.

"Haiti was clearly desperate: the most impoverished country in the Western Hemisphere, with a standard of living comparable to sub-Saharan Africa despite being only a few hours by air from Miami. Life expectancy was 52 years. Children were chronically hungry."

When he returned to Washington, Sachs spoke to senior officials in the IMF, World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and Organisation of American States. He describes how he expected to hear that these organisations would be rushing to help Haiti. Not so:

"Instead, I was shocked to learn that they would all be suspending aid, under vague 'instructions' from the US. America, it seemed, was unwilling to release aid to Haiti because of irregularities in the 2000 legislative elections, and was insisting that Aristide make peace with the political opposition before releasing any aid.

"The US position was a travesty. Aristide had been elected President in an indisputable landslide [in 1990] ... Nor were the results of the legislative elections in 2000 in doubt: Aristide's party had also won in a landslide."

Two elections took place in 2000. A range of political parties, including Aristide's Lavalas party, contested elections in May. As a result, Aristide dominated the new parliament, holding 19 of the 27 Senate seats and 72 of the 82 lower house seats – 200 international observers assessed the elections as satisfactory. Peter Hallward of King's College London comments in the Guardian:

"An exhaustive and convincing report by the International Coalition of Independent Observers concluded that 'fair and peaceful elections were held' in 2000, and by the standard of the presidential elections held in the US that same year they were positively exemplary."

Why then were the elections criticised as "flawed" by the Organisation of American States (OAS)?

"It was because, after Aristide's Lavalas party had won 16 out of 17 senate seats, the OAS contested the methodology used to calculate the voting percentages. Curiously, neither the US nor the OAS judged this methodology problematic in the run-up to the elections." (Hallward, 'Why they had to crush Aristide', The Guardian, March 2, 2004)

Methodology was contested in the election of eight senators out of a total of 7,500 posts filled. President Aristide persuaded seven of the eight senators to resign. He also agreed to OAS proposals for new elections. The opposition Democratic Convergence, however, did not, demanding instead that Aristide immediately vacate the presidency. Analyst Yifat Susskind explains:

"Members of Haiti's elite, long hostile to Aristide's progressive economic agenda, saw the controversy as an opportunity to derail his government." (Susskind, 'Haiti – Insurrection in the Making, A MADRE Backgrounder', www.zmag.org, February 25, 2004)

On November 26, 2000, Aristide was nevertheless re-elected president with his Lavalas Party winning 90% of the vote.

Haiti's elections may have been imperfect but, given Haiti's history of appalling dictatorships and violence, they marked a major step forwards in democracy. It made no sense for the US to react so aggressively by cutting off vital aid, just as it has made no sense for the West to insist that Haiti should, yet again, submit to military violence now.

US Congresswoman, Barbara Lee, challenged Colin Powell in a February 12 letter:

"It appears that the US is aiding and abetting the attempt to violently topple the Aristide government. With all due respect, this looks like 'regime change'... Our actions – or inaction – may be making things worse." (Quoted Anthony Fenton, 'Media vs. reality in Haiti', [zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=11&ItemID=4977](http://zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=11&ItemID=4977) February 13, 2004)

Consider the Times' version of these events:

"Mr Aristide will doubtless protest that a democratically elected figure such as himself should never be asked to submit to the will of self-appointed rebels. He has a point, but, in his case, it is a limited one. Mr Aristide won a second term in office four years ago in a manner that suggested fraud on a substantial scale. The resentment left by his flawed victory, his increasingly despotic and erratic rule and the wholesale collapse of the local economy inspired the rebellion against him." (The Times, Editorial, March 1, 2004)

This is the same Times which, in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, called for "a worldwide expression of anger at a small nation's sovereignty rudely shattered by brute force". ('Iraq's naked villainy', Editorial, The Times, August 3, 1990)

The cause in Kuwait was "simple on a world scale", the Times wrote grandly, "the defence of the weak against aggression by the strong". ('No mock heroics', Editorial, The Times, January 18, 1991)

### **Structurally Adjusted Rebels**

Since 2001, human rights activists and humanitarian workers in Haiti have documented numerous opposition killings of government officials and bystanders in attacks on health clinics, police stations and government vehicles. None of these killings were condemned by the US government.

Susskind notes that, according to a 2000 poll, Haiti's opposition represents only 8 percent of the population. The rebel gangs are linked to two groups financed by the Bush Administration: the right-wing Convergence for Democracy and the pro-business Group of 184. The Convergence is supported by the US Republican Party through the National Endowment for Democracy and the International Republican Institute. The Group of 184 is represented by Andy Apaid, a supporter of the former Duvalier dictatorship and a US citizen.

The Council on Hemispheric Affairs reports that the opposition's "only policy goal seems to be reconstituting the army and the implementation of rigorous Structural Adjustment Programs". (Quoted, Susskind, op.,cit) Hence its lack of popularity.

In an article titled, 'The little priest who became a bloody dictator like the one he once despised', the Independent's Andrew Gumbel writes of Aristide:

"Then in 1994, undaunted, he returned, messianic again, backed by 20,000 US troops and disbanded the Haitian military. He had the goodwill of the world, the overwhelming support of his electorate and plentiful funds from international aid agencies to breathe life into Haiti's moribund economy." (Gumbel, 'The little priest who became a bloody dictator like the one he once despised', The Independent, February 21, 2004)

As we described in Part 1 of this Media Alert, the "goodwill of the world" was expressed by supporting the massacre of the grassroots movement that had brought Aristide to power.

Aristide has presided over human rights abuses, including corruption and attempts to suppress dissent and intimidate opponents. However, journalist Tom Reeves puts the title of Gumbel's article into perspective:

"Whatever Aristide's mistakes and weaknesses have been (and they are many), they pale when compared to the extreme brutality of those who are today implicated in the violence in Gonaives and elsewhere in Haiti." (Tom Reeves, 'The US double game in Haiti', Znet, [www.zmag.org](http://www.zmag.org), February 16, 2004)

In 2003, Reeves asked a group of Haitians in Cap-Haïtien about Aristide's performance. One responded:

"We don't think Aristide is doing a good job, but at least now we can talk, we are free to come and go. The

Macoute must not come back... Yes, there is corruption and police brutality. But to compare our government with dictators is a hypocritical lie!" (Reeves, 'Haiti and the US game', Znet, March 27, 2003, [www.zmag.org/content/print\\_article.cfm?itemID=3337&sectionID=2](http://www.zmag.org/content/print_article.cfm?itemID=3337&sectionID=2))

The US lawyer representing the government of Haiti has accused the US government of direct involvement in the planned military coup against Aristide. Ira Kurzban, the Miami-based attorney who has served as General Counsel to the Haitian government since 1991, said that the paramilitaries who overthrew Aristide are backed by Washington:

"I believe that this is a group that is armed by, trained by, and employed by the intelligence services of the United States. This is clearly a military operation, and it's a military coup." ('Haiti's Lawyer: US Is Arming Anti-Aristide Paramilitaries, Calls For UN Peacekeepers', Amy Goodman and Jeremy Scahil, DemocracyNow.org, February 26, 2004)

Kurzban added:

"There's enough indications from our point of view, at least from my point of view, that the United States certainly knew what was coming about two weeks before this military operation started. The United States made contingency plans for Guantanamo."

Writing of the rebels in the Daily Mail, Ross Benson buries the known facts past and present:

"One of their commanders is Louis Jodel Chamberlain, leader of the army death squads before and after the 1991 coup, who is held to be responsible for the death of 5,000 men, women and children. He is not, to put it mildly, the kind of man that any American administration would wish to deal with." (Benson, 'The land of voodoo, The Daily Mail, February 28, 2004)

For the Independent's Adrian Hamilton, the US's worst crime is inaction:

"It is quite wrong to wash our hands of Haiti's future as we are now doing. It doesn't mean instant invasion, but it does mean making clear that we will not accept a military regime without democratic legitimacy." ('Why it is wrong to wash our hands of Haiti', Adrian Hamilton, The Independent, February 26, 2004)

Once again we find ourselves asking the question posed by dissident playwright Harold Pinter:

"When they said 'We had to do something', I said: 'Who is this 'we' exactly that you're talking about? First of all: Who is the 'we'? Under what heading do 'we' act, under what law? And also, the notion that this 'we' has the right to act,' I said, 'presupposes a moral authority of which this 'we' possesses not a jot! It doesn't exist!'" (Interview with David Edwards, 1999. See Interviews: [www.medialens.org](http://www.medialens.org))

It is a standard response of the liberal press to concoct a false, lesser Western misdemeanour – here, 'washing our hands of Haiti' – and then to rage at that invention. This promotes the liberal media's 'dissident' credentials, without harming, or calling down the wrath of, power.

The BBC writes:

"Haiti's political opposition has rejected a US-backed power-sharing plan aimed at ending the country's crisis." ('Haiti power-sharing plan rejected', 25 February, [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3517837.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3517837.stm))

Once again, the US is depicted as an 'honest broker', as though Haiti had no history. The BBC is happy to report without comment the proposal that a democratically elected government might share power with a gang of killers with a history of gross human rights abuses.

In similar vein, prior to Aristide's departure, ITN's Bill Neely talked of George Bush "losing patience" with the Haitian president – Bush as the benevolent father-figure in the wings. (ITN, 10:15 News, February 28, 2004).

Reversing the truth on BBC1 News, Kathy Kay reports:

"Long-term stability in Haiti isn't likely without a long-term American commitment." (Kay, BBC 10:00 News, February 29, 2004)

Krishnan Guru-Murthy of Channel 4 News writes:

"The democratically elected leader finally gave in to the rebels saying he wanted to avoid bloodshed while the international community stood by and did nothing. Sometimes it seems, it isn't worth waiting for elections. The US had helped Aristide before, restoring him to power years ago, but they were not going to do it again and said his resignation was in the interests of the Haitian people." (Snowmail bulletin, February 29, 2004)

The level of analysis is hardly worthy of a high-school student, or comment.

The Guardian writes:

"Despite what Mr Aristide says, Haiti has no terrorists, no al-Qaida cells, as in Afghanistan." ('Failure of will', Leader, The Guardian, February 28, 2004)

This is technically correct – for the media, terrorists are by definition people who use terror and violence to threaten Western interests. People who use terror and violence to +promote+ Western interests are therefore not terrorists.

The Guardian continues:

"Yet what, at this moment of dire need, have the powers done about it? Nothing much is the answer. For all their doctrines and declarations, they have dithered and debated, ducked and dodged, and danced that old, slow diplomatic shuffle." (Ibid)

No question, then, that "the powers" might have been doing something other than wringing their hands behind the scenes.

On February 11, US Congresswoman Maxine Waters issued a press release calling on the Bush administration to condemn the "so-called opposition" that was "attempting to instigate a bloodbath in Haiti and then blame the government for the resulting disaster in the belief that the US will aid the so-called protestors against President Aristide." (Quoted, Fenton, op., cit)

Waters pointed out:

"Under his leadership, the Haitian government has made major investments in agriculture, public transportation and infrastructure... The government [recently] doubled the minimum wage from 36 to 70 gourdes per day, despite strong opposition from the business community... President Aristide has also made health care and education national priorities. More schools were built in Haiti between 1994 and 2000 than between 1804 and 1994. The government expanded school lunch and school bus programs and provides a 70% subsidy for schoolbooks and uniforms."

But for Ross Benson of the Daily Mail, Aristide is the problem with no redeeming achievements worth mentioning:

"Instead of enacting a programme of social and economic reform 'to give the people what is rightfully theirs', Aristide allowed his cronies to plunder the national till, as so many have done before in this lush island paradise with its turbulent past of bloodshed, greed and endless tyrannies." (Benson, 'The Land of voodoo', The Daily Mail, February 28, 2004)

Some time in the future when Western interests are under attack, the media will once again obediently rise up in outrage as the forces of violence and terror threaten some distant democracy (real or imagined). But, for now, our journalists and editors are happy to accept that Aristide "had to go", that he had "lost the support of his people and of the international community".

Forget the democratic process. Forget the landslide victories that make a mockery of the popularity of Bush and Blair. Forget the tidal waves of blood that preceded the first, imperfect sign that Haiti might at last be waking from the nightmare of history – of endless dictatorships, endless poverty, endless military coups bringing torture and death to the suffering people. None of that matters. What matters to the media is power. What power says goes.

#### SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. In writing letters to journalists, we strongly urge readers to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Write to Andrew Gumbel:

Email: [a.gumbel@independent.co.uk](mailto:a.gumbel@independent.co.uk)

Write to Adrian Hamilton

Email: [a.hamilton@independent.co.uk](mailto:a.hamilton@independent.co.uk)

Write to the editor of the Guardian, Alan Rusbridger

Email: [alan.rusbridger@guardian.co.uk](mailto:alan.rusbridger@guardian.co.uk)

Write to Kathy Kay

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Write to the BBC's director of news, Richard Sambrook:  
Email: [richard.sambrook@bbc.co.uk](mailto:richard.sambrook@bbc.co.uk)

Write to Bill Neely  
Email: [bill.neely@itn.co.uk](mailto:bill.neely@itn.co.uk)

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