

Canada and Haiti: Relief Efforts in the Shadow of Past “Help”

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Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

In-depth Report: [HAITI](#)

Over the course of the past decade, Canada’s leading officials and most prestigious commentators have learned how to approach Haiti in the spirit of cynical power politics and racist condescension (or worse) while maintaining a posture of national self-flattery. With attention again riveted on Haiti following the horrific tragedy inflicted by Tuesday’s earthquake, this ugly mixture is once again on display. The need for emergency aid is, without question, urgent [see below for links]. But established patterns of “help” for Haiti need to be overcome if the destructive impact of this catastrophe is to be somehow limited.

Scattered self-congratulations can already be heard in Canada’s mainstream press (a willing partner, for the most part, in recent Canadian government crimes against Haiti). On Thursday, papers across the country ran editorials on Canadian policy and the relief effort. Under the title “Helping Haiti,” the Calgary Herald editorialized that “Canada’s response is not only appropriate, but one to be proud of. ... Once again, Canada’s humanitarianism and compassion shines brightly.” The Montreal Gazette concurred: “Canadians have, to their credit, been involved in helping Haiti help itself for years.” For its part, the Globe and Mail yet again cast Haiti as the “basket case of the Western hemisphere,” the editorial headline promising that “Today’s rescue is just the beginning.”

In previous years, such benevolent rhetoric has been to Western policy in Haiti what anti-terrorist slogans have been to Western policy in the Middle East. It was under the cover of such declared benevolence that the elected Haitian government was overthrown in 2004 by means of U.S., French and Canadian involvement; it was amidst similar rhetoric that Haitian movements resisting this outrage were decimated in the ensuing years with the “security assistance” of foreign powers.

This is not to distract from the urgent need for a massive international relief effort. But it should give us reason for pause. The Haitian struggle for sovereignty and decolonization is very much ongoing. And for many years, it has been common practice to package assaults on Haiti as aid. It is imperative that genuine aid and relief work be disentangled, in our understanding and in practice, from the criminal policies they are often used to justify.

This article does not address the details of the ongoing catastrophe in Haiti triggered by the earthquake of January 12. Rather, it provides a reminder of how calls to “help” Haiti were a cornerstone justification for one of the greatest crimes in the past decade of Canadian foreign policy. It is beyond me to discuss how the Haitian struggle for independence is likely to adapt to the catastrophic circumstances that have now emerged. What is clear is the need to not only expand the evolving relief effort, but also engage with the inevitable tensions within it.

“Operation Halo” 2004: Regime Change as an Aid Package

The 2004 regime change in Haiti was one of most despicable episodes in a miserable decade of Western aggression. Early that year, Haiti faced intervention from the two powers which have most tormented it throughout its history: France, which grew rich on this slave colony through to the late 18th century (Haiti declared its independence in 1804); and the U.S., which occupied Haiti from 1915-1934 and maintained client dictatorships in the country through to the late 1980s, and then again from 1991-1994. The intervention of 2004 was preceded by years of destabilization. Aid to the government was cut and re-routed through sources more beholden to donors. Finally, on February 29, U.S. Marines occupied the National Palace and forced Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile. Canadian troops secured the airport from which he was flown out of the country.

Put simply, the country produced by the world’s only successful slave rebellion – punished for centuries by spiteful racist powers – marked its bicentennial with renewed Western occupation. And so a presidential term that was supposed to last until 2006 was violently cut short. Among the Aristide presidency’s crimes was constructing a legal case for repayment by France of the massive payment extorted from Haiti in the 19th century to compensate for the slaves France lost when they freed themselves (the equivalent of \$21.7-billion today). The aftermath of the coup saw paramilitary forces with a well-known record of torture and extra-judicial killing ruthlessly target Haiti’s main mass-based political party, Lavalas. It is against the backdrop of centuries of such sabotage that Haiti has been made so vulnerable to disaster.

At the time, prestigious Canadian media joined officials in whitewashing the intervention as somehow charitable. Facing outrage from the 20-nation Caribbean Community (Caricom), Prime Minister Paul Martin framed the issue for the *Globe and Mail* immediately after Aristide’s ouster: “their upset is not with Canada per se. Their upset is with the fact a constitutionally elected president has lost his position.” What was necessary, he implied, was to refocus on humanitarian assistance for Haitians and spin Canadian involvement in these terms. As Martin put it: “we’ve got to get aid in there.”[1] Caricom, alongside the African Union (AU), refused to recognize the regime that had been installed with Canadian support. In the Canadian press, Martin found a more receptive audience.

Indeed, a sample of *Globe and Mail* headlines from the weeks of Canadian involvement leading up the coup is illustrative: “Martin helps in Haiti,” “PM offers to help solve Haitian crisis” (January 13); “How to help Haiti” (January 24); “U.S. asks Canada to help police chaotic Haiti” (February 13); “...Canada, U.S. adopt France’s suggestion that President’s departure might help Haiti” (February 27); “Canada considers sending troops to help Haiti” (February 28); “Time to help Haiti” (March 1); and so on. Official presentation of Canadian participation in the coup as an aid package fit all too naturally into such *Globereports*.

Riding out these diplomatic bumps, the Prime Minister would within a couple of months go on an official visit to Washington. Drew Fagan reported approvingly for the *Globe* how “Martin smiled broadly as Mr. Bush praised Canada’s commitments in Afghanistan and Haiti.”[2] By 2005, the Haitian regime change of February 2004 factored into news coverage as the start of a Canadian “peace mission.”[3] The spinning of “Operation Halo” (the official name for Canada’s February-July 2004 troop deployment) involved rewriting a state crime as a charity effort.

In the summer of 2004, the Canadian military role in Haiti gave way to such other forms of involvement as police deployment, financing and diplomatic support for the installed government of Gérard Latortue (who had been flown in from Florida to head the government after the coup). A combination of the reconstituted Haitian National Police (HNP), associated paramilitaries, and foreign police and military forces (now operating with United Nations authorization) acted to suppress movements calling for the restoration of democratic rule. Canadian involvement remained wide-ranging. In a period of mass political imprisonment without trial, for example, the installed Minister of Justice, Philippe Vixamar, explained to the University of Miami's Thomas M. Griffin "that he is a political appointee of the Latortue administration, but the Canadian International Development Agency ('CIDA') assigned him to his position and is his direct employer." [4]

Such were the forms of Canadian "aid." With a willing press, the Canadian government had little problem maintaining this destructive fiction at home. The routine was often laughable.

The fall of 2004, for example, witnessed an upsurge of popular demonstrations calling for Aristide's return, and a wave of lethal repression. For Prime Minister Martin, Canadian involvement in such a fight compensated for the limitations of Canadian participation in the occupation of Iraq. "Think about what we're doing in Afghanistan, think about what we're doing in Haiti," Martin explained in mid-October: "we are not on the sidelines." [5]

With Haitians reeling from the intensified repression, the Canadian government dispatched Prime Minister Martin for a November 2004 visit with the stated aim of bolstering the installed Haitian government's legitimacy. For good measure, Martin packed his plane with food and other aid supplies – a point Canadian reporters happily emphasized. The *Globe and Mail* account of his visit was published with a large picture of a young Haitian girl sitting on Martin's lap, waving a Canadian flag for the camera. This visit was later cited as a "humanitarian trip." [6]

Within this setting, it has been all too easy for Canadian commentators to express thinly veiled racism toward Haitians and to openly question their right to independence. Sticking with the case of the *Globe and Mail*, one may recall Marina Jiménez giving voice to Canadian hopes that "the poor people of Cité Soleil will have a change of heart, switching allegiance from the shadowy and ruthless *chimères* [i.e., activists affiliated with Haiti's leading mass party] to 'les blancs' in the uniforms who, this time, are in it for the long haul." Or Jeffrey Simpson, shedding crocodile tears over this "failed state" – whose "ills ... have persisted and even grown worse despite a United Nations military and police presence and hundreds of millions of dollars of foreign aid" – only to propose that independent Haitian governance be revoked and formally (if temporarily) replaced by a UN protectorate. [7] Simpson floated the proposal under a headline with the familiar message: "Hello, my name is Haiti and I really need your help."

More "help" of this kind is the last thing that Haiti needs.

Disaster Relief and Reconstruction

The election of René Préval in 2006 was a testament to the perseverance of Haitian society and its independent political organizations in the face of harsh circumstances. However, this decade's round of destabilization and repressive violence capped off a much longer period of imposed under-development, and again tipped the balance in favour of international and against sovereign Haitian institutions. Any country would require massive international

support to cope with a disaster on the scale of this week's earthquake. Now, international relief efforts are plainly imperative.

Massive reparations from Western powers to Haiti are long overdue. (This is in addition to the minimalist demand that the indemnity France extorted from Haiti for lost slave labour be repaid.) It is at this point flatly obnoxious to accompany the sending of any Western funds, even on a massive scale, with the faintest hint of self-congratulations. But funds and resources certainly need to be sent. An immediate challenge, as Naomi Klein [argues](#), is to ensure that all government resources are sent as grants, absolutely none as loans. Such demands are urgent and pressing.

The danger that Western powers will use this occasion to increase their leverage over Haitian society is real. President Obama's appointment of former president George W. Bush to join Bill Clinton in organizing the relief effort is a troubling sign. In Canada, while it was the Martin Liberals who carried out the intervention of 2004, the main apparent objection of the Harper Conservatives was that Canadian forces left too soon and should have participated more directly in repression. With Sarkozy's France calling a donors conference amidst a flurry of international commitments, the actual policies that emerge need to be carefully monitored and considered.

In sum, it is necessary to acknowledge and deliberately break with past crimes. Those who set up a continuum between recent years' intervention and proposed relief missions are issuing threats, not promises.

Over the past decade, the idea that more Western involvement in Haiti is always better has dovetailed with what Peter Hallward [has flagged](#) as "perhaps the most consistent theme of Western commentary on the island: that poor black people remain incapable of governing themselves." At a time when the need for international involvement is indeed urgent, it is all the more important to keep this racist tendency in check. •

Dan Freeman-Maloy is a Toronto-based writer.

Emergency Appeals

[The Haiti Emergency Relief Fund](#)

[Partners in Health](#)

Notes

1. "Ottawa works to ease Caribbean 'upset,'" Jeff Sallot (March 3, 2004; A17). What follows draws from the Globe and Mail unless otherwise indicated, partly because it is most representative of official opinion in Canada, partly because my notes from the period are based mostly on its coverage.
2. "Bush backs open border for beef," Drew Fagan – Ottawa Bureau Chief (May 1, 2004; A1).
3. "Martin vows to ease Darfur's suffering," Paul Koring (February 23, 2005; A1).
4. Thomas M. Griffin, "Haiti – Human Rights Investigation: November 11-21, 2004," Center for the Study of Human Rights, University of Miami School of Law (www.law.miami.edu/cshr/CSHR_Report_02082005_v2.pdf) : p. 24.

5. "Martin cool to renewed U.S. request for assistance; Canada stretched too thin to contribute to Iraq, PM says in Paris," Mark Mackinnon (October 15, 2004; A16).
6. "Internal strife will undermine rebuilding plan, PM tells Haiti," Brian Laghi – Ottawa Bureau Chief (November 15, 2004; A4); "On the road again," Brian Laghi (January 15, 2005; F3).
7. "Backyard Baghdad," Marina Jimenez (January 22, 2005; F4); "Hello, my name is Haiti and I really need your help," Jeffrey Simpson (June 8, 2005; A17).

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