

HAITI: Mysterious Prison Ailment Traced to U.S. Rice

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NEW YORK, Jan 17 (IPS) – A newly released investigation into the deadly scourge of Beri-beri in Haiti's National Penitentiary uncovered evidence that the clash between the manufacturing process used in U.S. processed rice and the traditional Haitian rice cooking method has been killing poor young men behind bars and leaving others morbidly ill.

By early 2006, firefights brought on by Haitian National Police and United Nations incursions into the capital's poorest neighborhoods had become commonplace. The raids, deemed "operations" by authorities, and reportedly designed to flush out criminal gangs, often resulted in high civilian casualties.

In a recent scientific study in the British medical journal The Lancet, done through random spatial sampling, it was estimated that 8,000 people were killed in the greater Port-au-Prince area from March 2004 through early 2006 after Haiti's elected government was ousted.

Already overcrowded and antiquated Haitian prisons quickly became packed with poor young men, drastically worsening the health conditions inside. The national penitentiary in Port-au-Prince built for a capacity of 800 today holds over 2,000 prisoners.

Last April, the Lamp for Haiti Foundation, a Philadelphia-based non-profit organisation created to address both the health care and the human rights needs of Haiti's poor, commissioned an investigation into the mysterious Beri-beri deaths of otherwise young, healthy prisoners in the Haitian National Penitentiary.

Staff attorney Thomas Griffin and staff physician James Morgan were given access by the national director of prisons, Wilkens Jean, to the sickest prisoners to search for clues to the source of the outbreak.

Griffin, a Philadelphia-based immigration lawyer and human rights investigator, had repeatedly visited the Haitian National Penitentiary since February 2002. In November of 2004, taking part in a Miami University human rights delegation, he found that poor supporters of the elected Aristide government had come under severe repression, showing up in "mass graves, cramped prisons, no-medicine hospitals, corpse-strewn streets and maggot-infested morgues".

In an October 2005 investigation, Griffin met with over 80 U.S. deportees. While conducting a follow-up investigation in March 2006, he found that a deportee from the United States he had met in October, Jackson Thermidor, had just died of congestive heart failure brought on by Beri-beri. Further, based upon reports from prison officials as well as prisoners, Beri-beri appeared to be devastating the overcrowded prison population.

If left untreated, Beri-beri slowly attacks its victims' nervous systems, eventually causing congestive heart failure. Treatment, which is almost always successful, consists simply of the correct administration of a multivitamin supplement.

Morgan and Griffin observed that many of those arrested during the administration of the post-coup, foreign-appointed government started to suffer from weight loss, emotional disturbances, impaired sensory perception, weakness, pain in the limbs, and periods of rapid and irregular heartbeat — all direct symptoms of Beri-beri.

Packed together in squalid conditions and provided meager, irregular meals, Haitian prisoners were fed a diet of rice that Griffin and Morgan discovered had lost its natural B1 vitamin/thiamin content, leading to the ultimately harmful effects. Griffin explained, "We found out that the little food they do give to prisoners is U.S.- processed rice."

All the Haitian rice production, which Haitians traditionally grew and consumed as a staple, was a healthy, whole-grain, vitamin B- packed, and native crop. But, due to U.S. policies since the early 1980's preferring U.S. rice producers over Haitians' own sustainable agriculture, tariffs were forced to drop, and U.S. rice flooded the Haitian market.

It not only destroyed much of traditional Haitian farm life that was the soul and lifeblood of the nation, but it pushed farmers off their land and into the city slums in Port-au-Prince. The prisoners, Griffin observed, who must eat the U.S. rice come from those slums, and are now dying of Beri-beri.

Griffin and Morgan gained access to all 21 of the prisoners then housed in the prison infirmary. Dr. Morgan made physical examinations as Griffin questioned the prisoners on the conditions of their confinement and their backgrounds.

Among other findings, only two of the prisoners had been convicted and were serving sentences. The others were legally innocent, pending trial or release. Only eight had ever been brought before a magistrate for a hearing, despite the Haitian Constitution's requirement of hearing within 48 hours of any arrest.

The average length of time prisoners had been detained as of the April investigation was 13 months, and one prisoner had already been locked up for two full years without ever being taken before a court. Nine of the 21 prisoners were suffering in the deep stages of Beri- beri, hardly able to talk due to chest congestion and fatigue from overworked hearts.

"None had lawyers," Morgan observed, "they all had sunken empty unfocused eyes, the trailing step and the air of used old men awaiting death, yet they were hardly in their twenties."

Most telling to the investigators, however, was that all the sick had depended on the prison's "twice a day meals from a large communal bowl, rather than, like most of the more healthy prisoners, on food prepared and delivered daily from outside by family members."

At the request of investigators, Wilkins Jean took them to the prison warehouse, where 50-lb sacks of imported U.S. rice made up almost the entirety of the food stores. Griffin explains, "On each one of these bags was written, in English: 'Extra Fancy Long Grain Enriched USA,' and 'Do Not Rinse Before or After Cooking.'"

Like most mass-produced rice in the U.S., it had been polished and bleached to make it more appealing to the consumer's eye. The process, however, removes key nutrients, including vitamin B1/ thiamine, from the grain.

To restore some of the nutrients, many U.S. rice mills routinely "enrich" the processed rice by adding back nutrients. The problem for Haitians, however, is that the nutrients are returned by merely coating the exterior of the rice grain with the mixture. Haitians, Griffin and Morgan would learn, have always scrubbed their rice before cooking it — which, according to Griffin, at the prison resulted in a meal "that had about as much nutritional value as cardboard."

The Lamp Foundation is now embarked on an ambitious education campaign at the prison and with the national prison directorate, and plans to open an office in Cite Soleil, the poorest community in Port- au-Prince, later this month.

"The only reason the general population of Haiti that eats U.S. processed rice is not also suffering from Beri-beri to the same degree is that they must get vitamin B/thiamin from other sources. The prisoners, on the other hand, get no other food," Morgan said. "We told Mr. Wilkens Jean this: if you are going to serve American rice, cook it like an American — don't rinse it before you cook it."

According to Prison Director Jean, prison authorities had tried to distribute vitamin B supplements because they already knew that the lack of it was underlying the Beri-beri epidemic. But, said Jean, the prison administration never had enough for all prisoners on any kind of regular basis.

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