

VIDEO: Haitian Realities Contrast With Stereotypes

Interview with Jean Saint-Vil

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Global Research, February 03, 2010

[Straight Goods](#) 26 January 2010

Theme: [History](#)

In-depth Report: [HAITI](#)

Jean Saint-Vil: Canada should own up to hosting 2003 summit to plot Aristide's overthrow

Last week, CBC's Radio One's The Current featured a panel discussion that included Ottawa-area resident Jean Saint-Vil, who is active with the solidarity network [Canada Haiti Action](#). Afterwards, we invited him to visit at the Straight Goods News Ottawa bureau.

Media coverage of and political reaction to the Haitian disaster don't offer much perspective on the situation. Saint-Vil explained that Haitian realities that go beyond the stereotypes of endemic poverty and corruption. He pointed to a racist subtext that subtly portrays Haitians as incompetent and ignores a centuries-old history of oppression and foreign meddling.

Saint-Vil said, for instance, that Haiti has never recovered from reparations it was forced to pay to France, totaling \$40 billion in modern currency. Returning that money to the Haitians would help them recover much better than a patchwork of foreign "aid" with all the vested interests and strings inevitably attached.

Jean Saint-Vil talks to Pat Van Horne about Haiti's realities, part 1

Many Haitians are frustrated by relief NGOs whom they see as self-serving. "The organizations are getting bigger, stronger, more recognized. The people they're helping are getting more desperate."

He compared the situation in Haiti with that of First Nations people in Canada, saying we must "acknowledge that the society in which we live was built on international crimes." White supremacists stole the "land of first nations people of Africa and the Americas."

Saint-Vil called for investment "in institutions of self-sustainability," especially agricultural production. "

"...The US is dumping rice on the Haitian market as part of aid to Haiti, but this is aid that kills, because a Haitian farmer cannot compete with the farmer in Texas, especially when that farmer is supported by the big machine, and the Haitian farmer ends up leaving his or her agricultural land, selling it to somebody who's probably looking for mining, and moves to the city. That's why Port-au-Prince, a city that was built for 250,000 people, had 2.5 million people in it."

History of struggle

"The history of Haiti is one of a struggle. The island of Haiti was first inhabited by people of the Taino First Nation, who were almost all dead within fifty years after the arrival of Columbus. Some of the indigenous people escaped to Cuba, and Puerto Rico, but on the island, forget it. They were replaced by Africans," who, for three hundred years, suffered as slaves on the island before successfully rebelling against the French, leading to the creation of state of Haiti in 1803....

"This was the only place in the Americas where African people were not enslaved, but it also meant they couldn't trade with anybody..."

Jean Saint-Vil talks to Pat Van Horne about Haiti's realities, part 2

"In 1805, the French foreign minister Charles Talleyrand wrote to the US president to help them crush Haiti because they said the existence of the Negro people in arms is a terrible threat to all white nations. The response of the Americans was to impose an embargo on Haiti that was renewed several times...

"The whites returned and became the main merchants in the big cities, and every time there was some kind of event that threatened their existence, the Germans, for instance, would show up with their guns and their boats and they threaten to blow up the national palace in order to get ransom. A few weeks later, the Spanish show up and do the same thing.

"Throughout the nineteenth century, you go and look in the history books and you will see eventually, you'd have countries like Denmark, Sweden, countries you'd never think about, were part of this, for instance, in 1883....

"In 1915, the US invaded, and stole Haiti's national reserves, and took it to the National City Bank in New York and basically imposed what we call a string of Mulatto dictatorships. Mulatto, for those who don't recognize what the term means, is the result of African women raped by white men, which created light-skinned Haitians, and these people were given higher status by the Americans. They became the whites of Haiti," and its political leaders...."

Coup follows coup follows...

Finally a black leader named Dumarsais Estimé came to power in 1946. He built rural schools but was deposed by an American coup. Another democratic leader, Fignolé, came to power in 1957 just before Duvalier.

"He lasted 19 days," said Saint-Vil. "The Americans deposed him. The Duvalier leadership in came under the same movement of black power. Duvalier pretended he was going to support the black masses, but in reality he was an equal-opportunity criminal. He killed Mulattos, he killed blacks. The Americans supported him because he said he was going to fight communism. Duvalier is the one who kicked Cuba out of the OAS [Organization of American States]."

In 1990, "finally the Haitian population managed to get democratic elections organized and participated en masse and named a liberation theologian President. At the time George

Bush, the elder, was the American President. Seven months later they deposed Aristide in a bloody coup using the Haitian military.

“When Aristide came back with Bill Clinton, there was a lot of hoopla about that, but they didn’t realize that Aristide had to agree that the three years he spent in exile were part of his five year mandate. And the Haitian constitution does not allow him to take more than one five year term. And he had to sign a plan accepting to privatize state-owned enterprises....

“His justification for accepting it was that it was either that or let the military rule forever....” Once re-elected in 2000, “Aristide was declared to be a fraud by the so-called international community.... It’s not very hard to demonize a black leader. You can call any black leader a dictator and eventually people will believe it. But I’ll have people remember that when Aristide was elected in 2000, his popularity was the highest of any leader in the Americas”

Aristide, now living in South Africa, was rescued from exile in the Central African Republic by a group of US activists led by [Amy Goodman](#) .

Saint-Vil says Canada is in league with the USA and France in exploiting Haiti for its own purposes. “There’s a Canadian company called Eurasian Mines that has concessions on ten percent of the Haitian territory, digging gold. And Haiti is right beside Cuba, not too far from Venezuela.”

Jean Saint-Vil talks to Pat Van Horne about Haiti’s realities, part 3

Canada, he says, was forced, under the Jean Chrétien government, to cooperate with the Americans on Haiti. He quotes former Canadian foreign minister Bill Graham as saying “There is a limit to how much we can constantly say No to the political masters in Washington.... Eventually we came onside on Haiti, so we got another arrow in our quiver.”

Canada hosted an international summit on Haiti on January 31-February 1, 2003 at Meech Lake, one year before the coup that removed Aristide. “That meeting is when they plotted the overthrow of Haiti’s president,” according to Saint-Vil.

“The coup was not just against Jean-Bertrand Aristide. There were 7,000 elected officials, they were removed in a single day, including some who were trained in search and rescue. They were all removed, so when the storm happened in September 2004, there was nobody trained and nobody with any equipment to do the search and rescue.”

Addressing Haiti’s many problems begins with understanding their origins — and taking action to correct injustices. Outspoken activists like Jean Saint-Vil bring us a picture of Haiti’s realities that we didn’t hear from the Foreign Ministers’s summit.

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