

# Haitians are Resourceful, Resilient, Proud and Dignified

"Stop Treating These People Like Savages"

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In-depth Report: [HAITI](#)

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The book, *Haiti Cherie*, published in 1953, was clearly intended for the souvenir stalls in the days when Haiti had tourists. The full-page photos show a Haiti, and particularly the architectural splendours of Port-au-Prince, during what was known as la belle époque, that period between the Second World War and the arrival, in 1957, of the crazed Duvalier father-and-son dynastical dictatorship in the now-crumpled presidential palace (which was designed and built by British architects and engineers).

Even before the earthquake, and without the photographic evidence in the book, it was scarcely credible that the already broken country and the shattered streets of Port-au-Prince were once elegant and glamorous. But until the dark night of Duvalierism came down, the Haitian capital was a rival to Havana as the chi-chi tropical retreat of Hollywood stars and the literati. Noël Coward was a regular at the Hotel Oloffson, which, a decade later, would be the setting for Graham Greene's *The Comedians*, his mid-1960s not-so-fictional novel that blew the whistle internationally on Duvalier's terror.

The death of the old monster François Papa Doc Duvalier in 1971, and the succession of his slow-witted teenage son, Jean-Claude Baby Doc Duvalier, brought about a brief encore to la belle époque. Until it was realised that the young playboy President was almost as bloodthirsty as his father, celebrities sipped cocktails again in Port-au-Prince. Mick Jagger inherited the creative perch on the Oloffson's veranda, where he wrote some of the Rolling Stones album, *Emotional Rescue*, in the late-1970s. Jackie Onassis was often holed up in the privacy of Habitation Leclerc, the capital's most handsome estate.

Haiti will not be enjoying another belle époque for many generations. Ravaged by the cancer of Duvalierism, self-serving military regimes, predatory elites, the cruelties of previous US administrations' realpolitik, and overpopulation it was long before the horrors and humiliations of last week already a wreck, by the norms and measures applied by reeling visitors from the affluent outside world.

And they are there again this week, rightly outraged, in huge numbers and, no doubt, mostly well-intentioned. But many of these new arrivals ? aid workers, journalists, diplomats, politicians and soldiers ? are in Haiti for the first time. They cannot be blamed for not having been there before but their inexperience of the country and their unfamiliarity with Haitians seems to be contributing to the catastrophe, rather than easing it.

The crisis, for more than a week now, has been not about the shortage of donated food, water, fuel and medicines but the distribution of those essentials that are piling up,

obscenely, at Port-au-Prince airport. On Monday evening's Channel 4 News, Jon Snow, at that same airport, interviewed the head of Oxfam in Haiti. Snow remarked that he and his team had been to areas around the capital that had not had any NGO visits, never mind material aid. The Oxfam woman spoke authoritatively, but emptily, about how her teams were all over the city conducting "assessments".

I'm certain every thirsty Haitian (water is a far more urgent priority than food) is much-comforted and reassured that armies of clerical teams from a leading NGO are all across town filling in forms.

(The runways, incidentally, at this allegedly grid-locked airport were, during Snow's broadcasts, disturbed by just one aircraft. The US military, now running the control tower, says there is no room to park more planes. Over Snow's shoulder, one could see acre upon acre of empty airport outfield.)

The alarmingly unanimous priorities of the spokesmen and women of aid organisations and the military, have been with "issues" (for they love that word) of "security", "procedures", and "logistics" (what we used to call "transport" or "trucks"). These obsessions indicate not only a self-serving and self-important careerist culture among some, though not all, aid workers (although wide experience of the profession in Haiti and across Africa tells me it is more common than donors would like to think), but that the magnitude of the crisis has paralysed them into a gibbering strike force of box-tickers. Most worryingly, it reveals that many ? even selfless ? NGO workers on the ground haven't a clue about the country and its people.

There has now solidified a consensus among aid organisations that the relief they are bringing is itself a liability; that distributing what Haitians are dying for ? literally ? will bring on a second nightmare. So, supplies pile up at the airport because, apparently, the Haitians need to be fed and watered at gunpoint. And there aren't enough men with guns to provide this totemic "security" and there aren't enough trucks to move the supplies around the country. (Haiti is always absolutely full of trucks. The first relief priority ought to be fuel for those convoys, to deliver the water, medicines and food. In that order).

This self-imposed blockade by bureaucracy is a scandal but could be easily overcome. The NGOs and the military should recognise the hysteria over "security" for what it is and make use of Haiti's best resource and its most efficient distribution network: the Haitians themselves. Stop treating them as children. Or worse. Hand over to them immediately what they need at the airport. They will find the means to collect it. Fill up their trucks and cars with free fuel. Any further restriction on, and control of, the supply of aid is not only patronising but it is in that control and restriction where any "security issues" will really lurk. And it is the Haitians who best know where the aid is needed.

An unbelievable 10,000 charities were already working in Haiti when the earthquake rocked the island, most of them tiny independent organisations. Humanitarian aid is, almost by definition, never where it is needed when natural disasters strike. But, in Haiti, what's needed has been flown in with impressive speed. Yet the combined concern of all those organisations ? many of them regarding fellow charities as professional rivals ? has so far been unable to get that assistance a ride from the airport. Too much energy in the last week has been expended on bickering about procedure and the fetish about "security".

This assumption that there is a security threat has gone completely unchallenged by an army of foreign press, equally unfamiliar with Haiti and the character of the Haitians. Indeed, TV reporters particularly, having exhausted the televisual possibilities of rubble, have been talking up “security”, “unrest” and “violence” when all available evidence would indicate anything but.

Astonishingly, among these TV dramatists, I am sorry to say, is the BBC’s Matt Frei. An incongruously ample figure around Port-au-Prince, Frei has been working himself up all week into what is now a state of near hysteria about “security” and the almost non-existent “violence”.

Over the weekend we saw him anticipating an outbreak of unrest, standing before a crowd of thousands of hungry, humiliated Haitians as they waited, patiently and quietly, to be given rations by UN soldiers. Their dignity and stoicism seemed to escape Frei who was, in any case, looking away from them while ranting about the inevitability of looming bloodshed ? conspicuously unlikely, judging from the evidence of his own report. (When he is not almost tumescent about violence, Frei speculates and pontificates pompously to camera, or booms at earthquake victims in French. Most Haitians don’t speak French. They speak Creole).

Frei’s reluctance to recognise the amazing self-control of these desperate people, and instead to amplify the hysteria about violence for which he has scant evidence, has brought him at times worryingly close to calling the Haitians savages.

Disgracefully, on Monday’s Newsnight, Frei had the audacity ? and again, anything but the evidence ? to declare: “The dignity of Haiti’s past is long forgotten.”

No, it certainly is not. And it took Bill Clinton, being interviewed by Frei on Monday, to correct him on that one, and to point out that Haiti still has dignity, immense quantities of it, especially in the present catastrophe. Their chat was turned by Frei, inevitably, to his appetite for imminent violence. “But what about this history of violence,” he asked, “and civil unrest in this country?”

“When you consider,” explained Clinton, “that these people haven’t slept for four days, haven’t eaten and have spent their nights wandering the streets tripping over dead bodies, I think they’ve behaved pretty well.”

Clinton might have added that Haiti’s history of violence has been state violence against its own people. And the Haitian enthusiasm for civil unrest has always been directed bravely at brutal and corrupt rulers.

Most journalists were also reporting breathlessly that Port-au-Prince’s main prison had collapsed. Good story. But not for the reasons we were told. The inexperience ? and indeed arrogance ? of every single reporter who drew our attention to the jail, missed the real significance of its destruction.

It was not that “violent criminals”, “murderers”, “gang bosses” “notorious killers” or “drug dealers” had “simply walked out the front gates”. (And just how did these escapees miraculously avoid being crushed to death in their cells?) Even if true, that was a minor detail to the people of Port-au-Prince, who had more urgent concerns.

The true significance of the prison’s implosion was that it represented for ordinary Haitians,

like the wreckage of the presidential palace and the city's former central army barracks, exquisite revenge upon the prime symbols of decades of state cruelty and oppression.

And many of the prison's inmates were surely not the dangerous stereotypes of these lurid reports. Haiti's jails were, notoriously, full of petty thieves and other unfortunates who shouldn't have been in there anyway. I once had to go into that Penitenciera Nationale, where I saw hundreds of men kept in cages, without room to lie down, shuffling around literally ankle deep in their own shit, to get out of there the son of a Haitian friend who'd been arrested so that the local police could extort money from his father for the release of his boy.

Like their fellow arrivistes in the NGOs, most reporters now in the country never saw Haiti in its everyday state of chaos and decay. They simply have no appreciation that, while the earthquake has magnified their misery, Haitians ? rivalled, possibly only by the permanently flooded Bangladeshis ? are the world champions at survival and that shortage, suffering, torment and the absence of infrastructure and effective government are their norms.

Haitians are extremely industrious and always busy, even though there are few formal jobs. They are resourceful, resilient, proud and dignified. On all my visits I have marvelled at Haiti's capacity not just to survive but to function and even, at times, to flourish. (The economy grew by 6 per cent last year. Things were on the up before the earthquake dished it out again on poor Haiti.) It is a puzzle I have never resolved and a fascination that has drawn me back to Haiti more than 20 times: it shouldn't work; nobody knows how it works; but somehow or other it does.

And it will again. I am reluctant to recruit Bob Dylan into the rescue and recovery operation in Haiti but, as Bob put it so neatly: "When you ain't got nothin', you got nothin' to lose..." No one understands that better than the Haitians.

In the past, with nothing to lose, they kicked out the French, overthrew colonialism with a slave rebellion and created the world's first black republic. Later, when still they had nothing, they chased Baby Doc to the airport, into exile, and took on his Tonton Macoutes death-squads with their bare hands. In 1990, against all odds, predictions and expectations of routine state violence, they voted-in their first democratically elected president.

Haitians certainly aren't happy always to have nothing. But they are accustomed to it. They are also adaptable and supremely skilled at making lives for themselves amid rubble, and out of rubble, both physical and political.

The pile of rubble today is more appalling and daunting than usual. But in that remarkable Haitian way, every lump of it will be recycled and, with it, the indefatigable Haitians will rise, rebuild and live again.

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