

# Haiti's Promised Rebuilding is Unfulfilled as Haitians Challenge Authoritarian Rule

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Five years after the Jan. 12, 2010 earthquake that struck Haiti's capital region, the loudly-trumpeted reconstruction of the country is still an unrealized dream.

2015 finds Haitians fighting tooth and nail in renewed political mobilizations to create the nation-building project that big governments and aid agencies pledged but then cruelly betrayed.

North American and European powers rushed planeloads and shiploads of soldiers and bottled water to Haiti in the days and weeks following the disaster, saying they would help Haiti "build back better." The world was aghast at the rare glimpse of Haiti's poverty provided by earthquake coverage. Leaders like Bill Clinton even acknowledged that the failed economic policies they had imposed over decades had impoverished Haiti and, indeed, are the source of its economic underdevelopment.

But the promises of the multi-billion dollar international relief effort and aid which will reach the grassroots have proven largely illusory.

A key admission in the months following the earthquake was that democratic governance and national sovereignty were essential tools for building Haiti on a new and progressive foundation. Today, the lack of democracy and sovereignty is at the epicenter of the political firestorm sweeping the country.

For many months, the Haitian people have carried out a sustained political mobilization demanding President Michel Martelly's resignation. They want elections, now postponed for over three years, to bring a new government and parliament that is not afraid to take up the unfinished tasks of post-earthquake reconstruction.

The protest movement calls itself "Operation Burkina Faso," inspired by events in that west African nation. In October, the people of Burkina Faso [overthrew an unpopular president](#), Blaise Compaoré, and his government. Haitians draw inspiration from that event and, crucially, are aware that it is inspired by the [socialist, egalitarian and anti-imperialist ideas](#) of former president Thomas Sankara, killed and overthrown by Compaoré's forces in 1987.



Five years after the earthquake that leveled the region around Port-au-Prince, the promises of a multi-billion dollar international relief effort and aid which will reach the grassroots have proven largely illusory.

Haiti's movement scored an important victory on Dec. 13 when Martelly's prime minister, Laurent Lamothe, resigned. But Oxygène David, a leader of the Dessalines Coordination (KOD), one of the parties leading the protests, told *Haiti Liberté* weekly, "Lamothe was just the smallest part of a trinity holding Haiti down. The other two elements are Martelly and MINUSTAH. They also must go for Haiti to have democracy and sovereignty."

MINUSTAH is the UN Security Council military occupation regime that deployed in Haiti in June 2004 to consolidate the Feb. 29, 2004 coup against Haiti's progressive and elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The next wave of large protests is planned to take place in cities across Haiti on Jan. 12, the earthquake's fifth anniversary.

### **Foreign occupation and the slide to authoritarian rule**

Three factors are driving the protest movement — Martelly's march towards authoritarian rule since coming to power in May 2011, the ongoing MINUSTAH occupation, and the failed record of earthquake reconstruction.

Although two presidential elections have been held in the years following the 2004 coup against Aristide, both Presidents René Préal and Michel Martelly have been dominated by and essentially subservient to imperialist powers. This weak state was dramatically symbolized by the partial collapse of Haiti's iconic century-old presidential palace in the earthquake. It could not be salvaged and has been razed.

Right after the quake, the U.S., Canada, and Europe rushed Haiti into an election which they brazenly meddled in to establish even stronger neo-colonial rule. A two-round presidential election in November 2010 and March 2011 brought Martelly to the presidency, but only after the Organization of American States (OAS) intervened and illegally changed the outcome. The largest political party in the country — Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas — was excluded, producing the lowest voter turnout of any polling in the Western Hemisphere's history. The election was entirely financed from abroad.

President Michel Martelly finally managed to get his long-time business partner Laurent Lamothe named as prime minister, and the two declared Haiti "open for business," meaning that foreign, sweatshop factory investment was to be Haiti's economic salvation, complemented by foreign aid and charity. Public sector intervention to tackle housing,

healthcare, education, and other emergency needs was eschewed.

Martelly was a close ally of the extreme right-wing that twice overthrew Aristide in 1991 and 2004. He honored former tyrant Jean-Claude Duvalier, who was driven out of Haiti by a popular uprising in 1986 and was content (and permitted) to live in France until his embezzled funds ran out and he returned to Haiti in January 2011.

Martelly's family faces widespread [allegations](#) of corruption, including abuse of authority, money laundering, and the squandering public funds. But the Haitian people are also alarmed by Martelly's steady march toward authoritarian rule. Martelly and Lamothe found excuses not to hold parliamentary and municipal elections, allowing electoral mandates expire. Rather than bargain in good faith with his political opposition to create a provisional electoral commission (CEP) to oversee democratic elections, Martelly sought to create a "permanent" CEP, stacking it with his partisans.

On Jan. 12, 2015, the mandates of most Parliamentarians expire, effectively dissolving the legislative branch. Martelly says he is then prepared to rule by decree.

In the past week, Martelly has nominated a controversial prime minister and concocted a political accord that would extend parliamentary terms and guarantee his own survival until May 14, 2016, but as we go to press, six vanguard senators have refused to vote, saying the prime minister and political map forward should come from the opposition and parliament, not Martelly's back rooms.

*Haiti Liberté's* Thomas Péralte reported on Dec. 31 that large political protests (for Martelly's resignation) took place for the first time ever in Haiti on Christmas Eve. Protesters said there is nothing to negotiate with the doomed regime, some saying they would prefer "civil war."

### **Cholera and public health care**

Tens of thousands of people died in the earthquake, and half the houses in Port-au-Prince, with a population of nearly three million, were destroyed or seriously damaged. Acute needs were intensified – for health care, sanitation, housing, public education, and economic development (including agriculture).

Early gains in earthquake relief were achieved with the public health initiatives taken by Haiti's Public Health Ministry in cooperation with international missions, particularly those of Cuba (working in Haiti since 1999), Partners In Health (present since the 1980s) and many [smaller, vital](#) health care projects.

Cuban personnel and hundreds of students and graduates from other countries of the Latin American School of Medicine in Haiti fanned out into some of Haiti's remotest parts to meet new and existing medical needs.[1] Other Latin American countries [made substantial contributions](#) to the Cuban-led health care effort. Cuba proposed a plan to the UN to create a comprehensive, public health care program for the country.

The Boston-based Partners In Health (PIH) expanded its work substantially, including building a second training hospital, [opened in Mirebalais in 2012](#). PIH, too, voiced support and hope for a public health plan.

Tragically, the advances in building medical infrastructure suffered a huge blow in the

autumn of 2010. The culprit was Haiti's familiar old nemesis — foreign political intervention. MINUSTAH soldiers recklessly and criminally introduced cholera into the country when a Nepalese contingent allowed their cholera-infected sewage to flow into Haiti's largest river system in October 2010. Over four years later, cholera has killed 8,500 people and sickened nearly 800,000, the world's worst epidemic. The number of reported cases monthly was averaging 2,000 in 2014 but jumped in the latter months of the year.

Although UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has promised money and resources to combat and eventually eradicate cholera, a report [one year ago](#) by the Washington DC-based Center for Economic Policy Alternatives noted, "The UN itself has pledged just one per cent of the funding needed for cholera treatment [estimated \$2.2 billion], even as the UN's mostly military and police mission in Haiti costs over \$572 million a year".

A recent [report by Doctors Without Borders \(MSF\)](#) blames those in authority in Haiti for persistent "shortages of funding, human resources, and drugs" in Haiti's health care system, including for cholera. The UN as well as the major governments participating in MINUSTAH are [denying any culpability](#) for introducing cholera to Haiti and then failing to assist in its prevention. Cholera is easy to treat and prevent if there is the will and funds. It just requires potable water delivery and sanitary sewage disposal. That's why people in New York or Toronto don't get or die from cholera.

The cholera disaster only deepened the festering wound on Haiti's body politic known as MINUSTAH. The continued presence of the force is an affront to the dignity and sovereignty of the Haitian people. [2]

### **The Housing Crisis**

Housing was another of the most immediate needs in Haiti following the earthquake. International aid provided short-term shelters to protect from the elements. A reported 110,000 plywood shelters and tens of thousands of tent shelters were provided. Beginning in 2011, one-year rental subsidies were provided to families as an incentive for them to leave tent camps. The camps were an eyesore as well as visible testimony to the absence of substantial programs to build housing.

After mountains of studies highlighting the need for a massive home-building program in Haiti, the gains are few. According to [a recent fact sheet](#) on housing prepared by Church World Service and the Mennonite Central Committee (drawing on figures reported to UN agencies), some 85,000 earthquake victims still live in 123 camps of internally displaced persons within Port-au-Prince's city limits.

Many tens of thousands more live in the new, sprawling informal suburban shantytowns of Canaan, Onaville, and Jerusalem, located beyond the pre-earthquake northern limits of the city. By a stroke of a pen, these communities are not considered as earthquake survivor settlements. That also means they don't qualify for formal assistance.

Thirty four per cent of the families that left survivor camps were forced out by people claiming land ownership or by government officials. Twenty two of the remaining camps face eviction.

The aforementioned fact sheet reports that in the past five years, 27,353 houses have been repaired and 9,053 have been built, at a cost of \$215 million. That amount compares to

\$500 million spent on the plywood shelters, most of which have long since deteriorated in the tropical weather or have been dismantled to build more permanent structures.

The UN-sponsored housing coordination body said in 2013: “Haiti needs to meet the challenge of constructing 500,000 new homes in order to meet the current housing deficit between now and 2020.”

The key instrument of Martelly’s housing “policy,” in keeping with the “Open for business” mantra, has been promises of financing for house construction. No housing agency of the government was created. But Haiti does not have networks of personal banking where people could obtain loans, and in any event, the proposal was laughable because most Haitians don’t have incomes to speak of. According to the [updated country report on Haiti](#) by the World Bank, more than six million out of Haiti’s population of 10.4 million live under the national poverty line of \$2.44 per day. Over 2.5 million Haitians live under the national extreme poverty line of \$1.24 per day. How are they to obtain loans to build houses?

In reality, the most active area of housing policy has been the clearing of survivor camps by force or by short-term economic lures. The latter has been facilitated by the Canada-funded, \$20 million program of providing one-year rental subsidies.

## **Education**

Public education was another key social need identified after the earthquake. Before the disaster, half of Haitian children did not attend school. The number reaching secondary school was much less. In 2011, the Martelly regime created a national education fund whose goal was said to get every Haitian child into school. It was to be financed by taxes on international phone calls and money transfers, which were never ratified or overseen by Parliament as constitutionally dictated. The plan has been plagued by a lack of transparency, and its achievements are very slim.

School administrators say that promised funding under the plan does not get delivered. Or it arrives months late. This year, the opening of the school year in September was delayed by a month because parents said they couldn’t afford to buy the textbooks and other supplies that schools were not supplying.

One of the outcomes of the fund, according to a [lengthy investigation](#) by Haiti Grassroots Watch published (in French) last July is that private schools have been favored over public schools. About 80% of Haiti’s primary and secondary schools are private, typically operated by churches and other charities from abroad.

Teacher unions in Haiti opposed the fund because it had no legislative authority and therefore operates outside of public oversight. Teachers have battled for years to establish a public education system and to pay teachers living wages. Last spring, strike action won salary increases of 30% to 60%, but salaries are still woefully inadequate.

## **Misguided economic development**

Economic development was cited as key to Haiti’s future following the earthquake, including for agriculture. Most Haitians still live in the countryside, and those forced to move to the cities by economic circumstance have not done so freely. But international aid and governments never came close to fundamental change in this sphere. They rehabilitated the



failed dogma that posits Haiti's low-wage, factory labor force as an economic asset to be built upon. And they perpetuated the neglect of Haiti's all-important agricultural production, including environmental decline prompted by deforestation.

A centerpiece of the sweatshop labor strategy promoted by former U.S. President Bill Clinton and current presidential aspirant Hillary Clinton is the Caracol Industrial Park, located far from the earthquake zone in Haiti's north. It was touted to create tens of thousands of jobs when its idea was launched in 2010. But a 2013 [investigation](#) by reporter Jonathan Katz revealed that "fewer than 1,500 jobs have been created — paying too little, the locals say, and offering no job security."

Katz reports, "Hundreds of smallholder farmers were coaxed into giving up more than 600 acres of land for the [industrial park] complex, yet nearly 95% of that land remains unused. A much-needed power plant was completed on the site, supplying the town with more electricity than ever, but locals say surges of wastewater have caused floods and spoiled crops."

Assembly factories in the new park [routinely pay below](#) the meager US\$4.76 average daily minimum wage. A [report](#) by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the International Finance Cooperation (IFC) in 2013, which monitor and enforce factories' compliance with national and international standards, found that all 24 of the factories it monitored in Haiti were "non-compliant". All violate occupational safety and health standards. All violate minimum wage laws, and 11 violate overtime standards. None provide adequate health and first aid services, and 22 were in violation of worker protection standards.

And what has become of the billions of dollars of aid promised to Haiti? A report by CEPR in 2013 said that much of the aid earmarked for Haiti was not spent in Haiti at all; it went to foreign contractors. "67.1% of USAID contracts has gone to Beltway-based firms, while just 1.3% has gone to Haitian companies", it wrote. And "of the \$6.43 billion do-gooders by bilateral and multilateral donors to Haiti from 2010-2012, just nine percent went through the Haitian government."

[Writing in July of 2014](#), the CEPR reported that of the \$1.38 billion awarded by USAID to projects in Haiti, just \$12.36 million has gone to Haitian organizations. Of the Haitian amount, 57% went to Cemex Haiti, a local cement mixing outlet and subsidiary of the Mexican Cemex, the Mexican company that is one of the largest cement producers in the world. (Cemex purchased the former state-owned cement producer in Haiti some 15 years ago.)

A lot of celebrities and other prominent people have come and gone from Haiti over the past five years. Careers have been created or polished up by charitable works. The Clintons come to mind. Many Hollywood actors. Canada's former governor-general (titular head of state), Michaëlle Jean, was a mouthpiece for the 2004 coup while she was governor general, then she became a Special Ambassador to Haiti for UNESCO following the earthquake. Recently, she [rode rough](#) over the objections of African countries to become the head of the Francophonie organization of French-speaking countries. What all these people as well as many other foreign do-gooders shared in common was their support for the political project keeping MINUSTAH and local clients (Martelly or some other derivative of him) in charge of the country, at the expense of the Haitian people.

CEPR Director Mark Weisbrot wrote one year ago that the lasting legacy of the earthquake

“is the international community’s profound failure to set aside its own interests and respond to the most pressing needs of the Haitian people.”

But then there is the Haitian people – their mounting political actions and their unrelenting determination to build a country based on sovereignty and social justice. And their true and faithful international allies. Like the countries and healthcare projects mentioned earlier in this article. Like the lawyers of *Bureau des avocats internationaux* (BAI) and Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH) who are [suing the UN](#) on behalf of the victims of cholera. Like the [SOIL sanitation project](#) and the organizations of peasants and farmers of Latin America who are working in the Haitian countryside. Like many [school support projects](#) which are an important form of the struggle for public education in Haiti.

These are the organizations which are working together with the Haitian people to help shape Haiti’s future.

## Notes

[1] For an early 2010 report of these efforts see [‘Field Notes from Haiti: After the Earthquake’](#), by MEDICC (Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba).

[2] Read an eight page essay on the history of foreign intervention in Haiti: [‘Haiti’s humanitarian crisis: Rooted in history of military coups and occupations’](#), by Roger Annis and Kim Ives, May 2011.

***Here are places to go for information:  
CHAN website, Haiti Liberté, IJDH***

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