

# In Haiti Kill the Poor, Leave Right-Wing Death Squads Untouched

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The United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) has been blatant in its support of rightwing forces, including the Haitian police, and has been systematic in carrying out human rights abuses against the poor people of Haiti, supporters of Aristide and his Lavalas party, writes Ben Terrell.

As Kofi Annan moves on to life after the UN, it's important to look at the less-discussed 'regime change' which the Bush administration engineered with Annan's help. The outgoing secretary-general's supporters argue he did what he could to register disapproval of the Iraq invasion, but in the case of Haiti, he actually helped facilitate a bloodthirsty imperial agenda.

MINUSTAH, the UN mission to Haiti, was put in place to support the illegal post-coup regime which ousted the democratically elected government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in February 2004. Countries participating in the UN's Haiti mission, whose mandate is currently up for renewal, carried favour with Washington, thereby repairing Iraq war-related rifts with the Bush administration. Brazil's participation was seen by many observers as part of its bid to gain a seat on the UN Security Council.

Brian Concannon, director of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti and a former UN human rights observer in Haiti, points out that 'until 2004, the UN, for good reasons, only deployed peacekeepers where there was a peace agreement to enforce. Only in Haiti has the Security Council deployed blue helmets to enforce a coup d'état against an elected government. With the MIF [Multinational Interim Force] and then MINUSTAH, the UN abandoned a half-century of principles and common sense, with predictable results.' Since replacing the US marines in July 2004, the UN troops have supported the Haitian police in crackdowns on the urban-poor supporters of Aristide and his Lavalas party.

Brian Concannon notes, 'In contrast to its decisive action in Cite Soleil, MINUSTAH has been tolerant of right-wing paramilitary groups. For months after its deployment, MINUSTAH declined to dislodge the paramilitary groups that helped to overthrow the government from police stations. In August 2005 a paramilitary group called the Little Machete Army killed dozens of spectators at a soccer game in broad daylight near a MINUSTAH observation post. MINUSTAH never tried to stop the massacre or pursue paramilitary members, even though the group has terrorised the Grande Ravine area for two years.'

Since February 2004, thousands of non-violent activists and other civilians have been killed, arrested, tortured and exiled by the post-coup regime, which the UN mission in effect was set up to support. This essential fact rarely appears in media analysis of Haiti, so few in the

US understand why some have taken up arms to defend their neighbourhoods. In defence of ongoing military operations in the poorest neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince, UN commanders in Haiti claim they only launch assaults after they have been fired at. But during a week-long August 2006 visit to Haiti's capital, I was told otherwise.

I witnessed a 24 August UN operation in Simon Pele (a community bordering the sprawling seaside shantytown Cite Soleil) which was stunning in its disregard of the dangers of using heavy calibre weapons in a densely populated area. Such operations had been carried out in Simon Pele throughout August in a UN campaign to 'secure' the area. Video footage taken by a photographer also on the scene shows a Brazilian soldier firing from the top of an armoured personnel carrier. I witnessed Brazilian troops running from two armoured personnel carriers into Simon Pele. The soldiers within the neighbourhood were also firing their weapons.

One of those shots killed a young man whose mother I spoke to four days later. Adacia Samedy told me how her son Wildert was fixing a radio on the roof of their family home when UN snipers shot him in the operation. Ms. Samedy told me, 'My message to the UN is: Thank you for killing my son. I don't see the sense in their work, they come in, shoot, and people passing can get shot.' I asked her if any UN personnel had returned to see if civilians were killed, or to offer any assistance. Nobody with the UN had offered so much as a basic acknowledgement of her loss. Queries I have directed to UN spokespeople about the killing of Wildert Samedy remain unanswered.

Another family, that of wheelchair-bound civilian William Mercy, told me they were similarly ignored by the UN after a raid on their section of the Bel Air neighbourhood in Port-au-Prince. Brazilian UN troops swept through the alley outside their home in June 2005 and shot the top of Mercy's head off, later killing several other unarmed civilians the same day.

I interviewed an older gentleman who was moving his family out of the area, which he told me holds nothing but misery for local youth. I asked him about armed groups the UN claimed it was fighting. He said, 'I can't say anything about that,' but that many people had been shot and killed by the UN in the neighbourhood. None were linked to any armed groups, all were 'workers'.

Near the bullet-riddled dwelling from which he was pulling out furniture was a church pockmarked by gunfire from UN forces. A Haitian journalist told me the UN claimed there were armed gang members in the church, but that, given the seriousness with which residents feel about Catholicism, no armed combatants would use such a sanctuary for a hideout. A school on the same side of the street was also destroyed by high calibre guns.

In 2005, Harvard Law Student Advocates for Human Rights and Brazil's Global Justice Centre concluded, 'MINUSTAH has provided cover for abuses committed by the HNP [Haitian national police] during operations in poor, historically tense Port-au-Prince neighbourhoods. Rather than advising and instructing the police in best practices, and monitoring their missteps, MINUSTAH has been the midwife of their abuses.'

Several months earlier, a University of Miami Law School report concluded, 'Both forces admitted that it is a confusing "free for all" when the HNP conduct an operation in a poor neighbourhood because there are no radios shared by HNP and the MINUSTAH forces and, even if there were radios, nobody speaks the same language. On a neighbourhood operation, they admitted, there is no clear strategy or objective, but operations devolve into

“just shoot before you get shot”.’

In 2004 and 2005 UN troops repeatedly stood by as Haitian police opened fire on non-violent protesters demanding the return of Aristide. In April 2005, Amnesty International noted that ‘Haitian national police officers (HNP) reportedly used live ammunition against Lavalas supporters as they peacefully demonstrated against the United Nations mission headquarters in Boudon, Port-au-Prince.’

But just allowing Haitian police to kill civilians was not enough for prominent rightwing figures in Port-au-Prince. In meetings with UN officials, the elite-owned media and veteran anti-Aristide figures pushed a steady drumbeat of demonisation of poor neighbourhoods that one Haitian activist told me reminded him of propaganda disseminated before the 1994 Rwanda genocide. In January 2006 Reginald Boulos, president of the Haitian Chamber of Commerce and a key supporter of the 2004 coup, told Radio Metropole, ‘You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs. We think that MINUSTAH’s generals need to make plans to limit collateral damage. But we in the private sector are ready to create a social assistance fund to help all those who would be innocent victims of a necessary and courageous action that should be carried out in Cite Soleil. ... When terrorists occupy some lawless zones, there are always innocent victims.’ Elsewhere in the interview Boulos called on UN troops to help police ‘neutralise all the armed criminals and terrorists who are terrorising the metropolitan area.’

Most poor adults in Haiti have strong memories of death squad terror during the first anti-Aristide coup in 1991–1994, which killed around 5,000 people. That history was frequently referred to as a ‘Solidarity Encounter With the Haitian People’ which Lavalas activists staged in Port-au-Prince in August 2006. The conference brought international visitors to share political insights and experiences with Haitians struggling on the ground. Jacques Depelchin, author of ‘Silences in African History: Between the Syndrome of Discovery and Abolition,’ and executive director of the Ota Benga Alliance for Peace, Healing and Dignity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, spoke several times at the conference. He told me, ‘It is important for people to understand that Aristide and Lavalas members are connected through generations to the successful slave revolution of 200 years ago.’ Later, as we shared a car together in Port-au-Prince, he told me, ‘the problem of Haiti is really a structural one: they are not supposed to have succeeded or, worse, to have survived and still be resisting’.

As to the ‘great powers’, Depelchin said, ‘one should not harbour illusions: [the UN] is a club of states, structures which cannot even respect their own conventions (for example, the Convention Against Genocide, passed in 1948). In case the UN falters, there is now the G8 to make sure that ultimate power rests with the most powerful. Radicals around the world need to think in terms of the kind of emancipatory politics which drove the slaves to overthrow the system as it was then known. Democracy à la US/France/Canada is consensus politics around an agenda set up by financial and economic interests. That agenda is to ensure that what happened between 1791 and 1804 is forgotten forever or, if remembered at all, is a history written and propagated by the current powers that be.’

Haitian revolutionary leader Touissant L’Overture once wrote that any effort by plantation owners to reimpose slavery ‘would be to attempt the impossible: we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it’.

Rene Civil, a Lavalas leader who spent much of the coup period in exile, struck a similar chord at the solidarity encounter, when he said: 'The people of Haiti, who believe in freedom, who have tasted freedom, will never accept this criminal, slaving system.' Civil also denounced the global system 'which causes economic, political, military and social war on the people of the world', and prevents poor nations like Haiti from exercising their independence.

Rene Civil was arrested shortly after I saw him speak at the conference, on charges Brian Concannon describes as 'dubious'. Initially claiming that Civil was just being brought in for routine questioning, the authorities have moved the activist to Port-au-Prince's downtown penitentiary. Dissidents in Haiti both fear for Civil's safety there and worry that his arrest may signal a new round of judicial harassment of activists.

Dave Welsh, a US trade unionist who attended the solidarity conference, told me, 'Haiti is still under military occupation. The occupiers hope the UN label will give a fig leaf of legitimacy to French, US and Canadian plans to benefit from the nation's labour and resources, control the Haitian state, and prevent any restoration of Haitian sovereignty and democracy. Countries like Brazil, who provide the UN troops that are brazenly and repeatedly killing civilians in their homes, undoubtedly have their own reasons for two years of willing support for this brutal occupation.' Welsh was also in Haiti in July 2005 as part of a labour and human rights delegation which documented the aftermath of a massacre in which Brazilian troops killed up to 60 Cite Soleil residents in the midst of targeting a Lavalas militant and community leader. (I also spoke to survivors of that massacre, including a pregnant woman who was fired upon by UN troops in a helicopter. She lost her baby but was saved by Doctors Without Borders.)

Brian Concannon told me that in recent conversations, he has heard 'over and over from poor Haitians that they wanted disarmament in their neighbourhoods, but in tandem with disarmament in the wealthy neighbourhoods that are the main source of guns that get to the slums, and the disarmament of death squads and former soldiers who kill Lavalas supporters with impunity.'

Concannon adds, 'If the MINUSTAH operations really aimed to establish law and order, they would start by obeying the law: making legal arrests of those suspected of possessing guns, with a valid judicial warrant, rather than undertaking deadly indiscriminate attacks on poor neighbourhoods.'

But the UN shows no interest in following that direction. On 19 August, Amaral Duclona, a spokesman for armed groupings in Cite Soleil opposed to coup forces, told Reuters, 'UN troops don't want peace and disarmament because they want a justification for their presence here.' Duclona asked, 'How can we hand over our weapons while UN troops continue to conduct heavy attacks against us?'

On 19 October 2006 Brazilian troops levelled dwellings in Cite Soleil to widen a road, and as angry residents demonstrated to stop the project, soldiers opened fire and killed at least three people. Two months later, the San Francisco Bay Area-based Haiti Action Committee, which keeps close daily contact with activists and human rights observers in Port-au-Prince, stated, 'In the early morning of Friday 22 December, starting at approximately 3 a.m., 400 Brazilian-led UN occupation troops in armoured vehicles carried out a massive assault on the people of Cite Soleil, laying siege yet again to the impoverished community.'

Eyewitness reports said a wave of indiscriminate gunfire from heavy weapons began about 5 a.m. and continued for much of the day. Referring to UN soldiers and Haitian police, Cite Soleil resident Rose Martel told Reuters, 'They came here to terrorise the population. I don't think they really killed any bandits, unless they consider all of us as bandits.' The Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti estimates more than 20 civilians were killed, including elderly and children. A US doctor who interviewed survivors after the assault was told by survivors that 'a UN helicopter circled [Cite] Soleil and fired bullets down on the homes of thousands of people'.

The 22 December operation was partly in response to a sustained campaign of rightwing pressure which blamed alleged gang leaders in Cite Soleil for kidnappings in Haiti. But Lovinsky Pierre-Antoine, coordinator of the September 30 Foundation, an organisation which supports victims of the first and second coups against Aristide, told me that the most widely covered kidnapping in the two weeks before the 22 December attack, that of anti-Lavalas Senator Andre Riche, was 'political theatre'. Lovinsky told me that rightwing media outlets broadcast inflammatory editorials about the kidnapping without asking many essential questions, including why the heavily armed bodyguards of the prominent anti-Lavalas politicians kidnapped did not have their weapons taken away, and how the politicians managed to escape unscathed from captivity. Lovinsky points out that the media outlets calling for crackdowns on Cite Soleil 'are in full support of Michael Lucius', the former central director of the judicial police implicated in kidnapping operations.

The Haiti Action Committee noted, 'The kidnapers are mostly well connected to the business elite and coup regime. Even Police Chief Andresol admits the national police are involved in much of the crime wave, including kidnappings.' Canadian journalist Anthony Fenton spoke with 'numerous sources' (who could not go on the record due to security concerns) that connected Senator Youri Latortue, nephew of post-coup regime Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, to kidnapping rings. In August 2005 prominent businessman Stanley Handal was arrested for involvement in kidnapping; the Haiti Information Project reported, 'Handal is a member of one of Haiti's wealthiest families that supported the ousting of Aristide in 1991 and 2004. He was initially arrested along with eight members of Haiti's police force for running a kidnapping ring after he attempted to use a stolen credit card taken from one of his victims. The judge who released them, Jean Péres Paul, is responsible for keeping Father Gerard Jean-Juste behind bars and for the arrest of journalists Kevin Pina and Jean Ristil on 9 September. The police officer responsible for the initial investigation into Handal's case has reportedly been forced into hiding.'

Hopes for progressive change in Haiti were buoyed with the election of Rene Preval on 7 February 2006. Preval's success was a victory against long odds by the popular movement which first swept Jean-Bertrand Aristide into office in 1990. Preval, who served as Haiti's second democratically elected president from 1996 to 2001, ran with Espwa (Creole for 'hope'), a party hastily assembled for the elections with little organising capacity. Because of the post-coup government's refusal to release political prisoners and its continued repression of Lavalas, Aristide's party (by far the largest political formation in Haiti, did not officially field candidates in the presidential election.)

But a year later, the police, the judiciary, and other ministries in Preval's government remain controlled by coup figures, and major media are run by rightwing elites. Though Preval helped achieve the release of prominent political prisoners such as Annetee Auguste ('So Anne'), Yvon Neptune, and others, hundreds of political prisoners illegally jailed by the coup regime remain behind bars. Preval also has little control over the UN mission.

In a 19 December 2006 report on the UN mission in Haiti, Annan recommended an extension of MINUSTAH's mandate beyond 15 February 2007. Annan's report gave no acknowledgement of charges of sexual abuse of Haitian women and girls by UN troops, or of documented killings of civilians in military assaults. Annan states, 'The Mission's continued deployment will be essential, since destabilizing forces continue to use violence to attain their objectives.'

But UN representatives seem disinterested in anti-Lavalas violence. A study published on 30 August 2006 in the prestigious medical journal 'The Lancet' concluded that in the 22 months after Aristide's removal there were 8,000 murders and 35,000 sexual assaults in the greater Port-au-Prince area alone. More than 50 per cent of these murders were attributed to anti-Aristide and anti-Lavalas factions including armed anti-Lavalas groups, demobilised army members and government security forces. The report also stated that UN soldiers 'were identified by respondents as having issued death threats, threats of physical injury, and threats of sexual violence'.

The report's co-author, Athena Kolbe, told me, 'We notified more than a dozen UN staffers in Haiti of the report during last summer and told them that we would be in the country and available to share an advance copy of the report with them and discuss it if they had any questions. We had no response before or during the trip from anyone associated with MINUSTAH ... [W]e got an email message from a UN staff person declining to meet with us, stating that she was busy and saying, "I don't know that you have anything of relevant [sic] to share with us".'

In early January, Brazilian Major General Carlos Alberto Dos Santos became the fourth commander of the UN force in Haiti (consisting of 8,360 total uniformed personnel, as of 30 November 2006). Dos Santos said, 'We are going to work in the same way as we have worked before. Nothing has changed about our mission or our obligations.' Since Dos Santos made that commitment, UN military operations have continued. Among the civilians killed by UN gunfire in these attacks, as reported by the Haiti Information Project, are seven-year-old Stephanie Lubin, four-year-old Alexandra Lubin, and nine-year-old Boadley Bewence Germain.

Lovinsky Pierre-Antoine and other activists point to the unabated UN killings of civilians in their campaign against a renewal of the MINUSTAH mandate.

*Ben Terrell is a San Francisco-based writer who has visited Haiti four times since the 2004 coup which drove the democratically-elected Aristide government from office.*

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