

Invisible Violence: Ignoring Murder In Post-coup Haiti

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In an eight-minute report (6/5/05) in which she rode in a U.N. armored personnel carrier and extolled the bravery of U.N. soldiers, NPR correspondent Lourdes Garcia-Navarro cited “human rights organizations” as saying that “things have improved since the Aristide days.” The NPR report interviewed two members of the U.N. force, one U.S. police trainer, one Haitian police official and Gérard Latortue, the head of Haiti’s unelected interim government. It neglected to quote any victims of the violence perpetrated by the Latortue regime or any human rights organizations critical of the governmental-sponsored violence—perhaps because they might have pointed out that such violence actually increased dramatically during Latortue’s time in power.

After Haiti’s democratically elected leader, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was ousted in February 2004, the United States, Canada and France put into place an interim government made up of members of the opposition. Latortue, a wealthy Haitian-American, was installed as the head of this government.

On April 30, 2004, the United Nations, under U.N. Resolution 1542, established the U.N. Stabilization Mission to Haiti, known as MINUSTAH, grouping more than 9,000 military and police personnel from more than 40 countries under the leadership of Brazil and Canada. For more than 26 months, the interim government used former members of Haiti’s disbanded military, along with U.N.-trained paramilitary police, to crack down on the slum-dwelling supporters of the ousted government and of Fanmi Lavalas, the political party which had voted Aristide into office. During this period, the mainstream U.S. press observed a virtual blackout on the state-sponsored violence perpetrated by the U.S.-backed interim Haitian government.

Aristide under fire

For more than two-and-a-half years prior to the 2004 coup, paramilitary rebels led by former Haitian police chief Guy Philippe had attacked Haiti from bases in the Dominican Republic. They killed civilians and government officials, targeted police stations, Haiti’s largest dam and even the presidential palace, all sparking further violence. Government aid embargoes by both the Clinton and Bush administrations further stripped bare the foreign aid-dependent Haitian state.

Opposition-aligned political parties and anti-government “civil society” organizations, however, received tens of millions of dollars in training and support funds during that time from U.S., Canadian and European aid agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Canadian International

Development Agency. With the Haitian currency, the gourde, plunging in value, poverty-stricken Haitians struggled under mounting prices and political destabilization.

Even under these conditions, the Aristide government continued to invest in education, medical training and a program to fight human trafficking, albeit with a yearly budget of approximately \$300 million for a population of about 8 million. Daring to resist IMF calls to privatize its public industries while raising the minimum wage for Haitian garment industry workers and bringing suit against France for \$21 billion in colonial reparations, the Aristide government accumulated powerful enemies.

Further political polarization resulted in violence, doggedly covered by the mainstream U.S. press throughout Aristide's second administration (2/01-2/04). One of Aristide's most widely publicized North American critics counted approximately 212 politically motivated deaths during Aristide's second government, attributing 50 of those killings to the opposition (Michael Deibert, Notes From the Last Testament).

Murderous operations

By contrast, a National Lawyers Guild investigation documented that "800 bodies" had been "dumped and buried" by the morgue in Port-au-Prince in just the first week following the coup; the usual number under Aristide was less than 100 a month (3/29-4/5/04). The University of Miami Human Rights Investigation, a 10-day survey (11/11-21/04) during the interim government, discovered piles of corpses in Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince—victims of state security and paramilitary forces (Boston Globe, 4/19/05). World Bank official Carolyn Antsey told this reporter that "thousands died" as a result of the February 2004 events.

Alternative press agencies, human rights organizations and independent investigations, including Amnesty International, the New York University School of Law, L'Agence Haïtienne de Presse (AHP) and Dr. Paul Farmer's Partners in Health, reported a concerted wave of interim government violence and persecution, while much of the U.S. mainstream press remained virtually silent.

Throughout 2004 and 2005, reports from the non-profit alternative news service Haiti Information Project (HIP) uncovered killings of Lavalas supporters carried out by members of the interim government's Haitian National Police (HNP). HIP (7/05) also documented murderous operations, with victims often shot in the head, committed by the Brazilian and Jordanian contingents of MINUSTAH. The University of Miami Human Rights Investigation, conducted by Boston immigration lawyer Thomas Griffin in mid-November 2004, documented mass murder by the HNP, mass graves, cramped prisons, no-medicine hospitals, corpse-strewn streets and maggot-infested morgues—the interim regime's means of dealing with the supporters of the ousted Aristide government. Nine months after Aristide was removed, Griffin wrote,

U.S. officials blame the crisis on armed gangs in the poor neighborhoods, not the official abuses and atrocities, nor the unconstitutional ouster of the elected president. Their support for the interim government is not surprising, as top officials, including the minister of justice, worked for U.S. government projects that undermined their elected predecessors. . . . U.N. police and soldiers, unable to speak the language of most Haitians. . . resort to heavy-handed incursions into the poorest neighborhoods that force intermittent peace at the

expense of innocent residents. The injured prefer to die at home untreated rather than risk arrest at the hospital. Those who do reach the hospital soak in puddles of their own blood, ignored by doctors.

A few mainstream outlets occasionally reported on individual incidents of violence perpetrated by the interim government. The Miami Herald (3/1/05) reported: “Haitian police opened fire on peaceful protesters Monday, killing two, wounding others and scattering an estimated 2,000 people marching through the capital [on February 28] to mark the first anniversary of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s ouster. . . . Peacekeepers, whose orders are to support the police, stood by as the attack occurred. The police quickly disappeared, leaving the bodies on the street.”

On March 24, 2005, the Associated Press wrote: “Police opened fire Thursday during a street march in Haiti’s capital to demand the return of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Witnesses said at least one person was killed. . . . Associated Press reporters saw police firing into the air and toward protesters.” Another AP dispatch (4/27/05) reported, “Police fired on protesters demanding the release of detainees loyal to Haiti’s ousted president Wednesday, killing at least five demonstrators.” On June 5, 2005, Reuters wrote, “As many as 25 people were killed in police raids on Friday and Saturday in the slums of Haiti’s capital.”

In one of the most graphic accounts to find its way into the mainstream press, the Miami Herald wrote (9/1/05):

“The police carried assault rifles and wore black masks. The gang they accompanied had brand-new machetes. According to witnesses and U.N. investigators, they stormed into a soccer match during halftime, ordered everyone to lie on the ground and began shooting and hacking people to death in broad daylight as several thousand spectators fled for their lives. . . . Some were handcuffed and shot in the head by police, witnesses said. Others were hacked to death.”

Missing the story

But such forthright reporting was exceptional, particularly in the most prominent news outlets. Studying the last two years of coverage by three leading mainstream U.S. newspapers—the New York Times, Los Angeles Times and USA Today—along with National Public Radio, Extra! found that 98.6 percent of the pieces related to Haiti ignored the role of state-sponsored violence and persecution. The few that did mention them provided a few isolated examples, usually working to discredit the documented incidents as partisan political allegations. The human rights reports citing a high number of political prisoners and killings by the interim government’s HNP were rarely cited by the mainstream press.

Following the 2004 coup, press accounts based on interviews with interim government, MINUSTAH and U.S. government officials ensured that an official version of events prevailed. These media outlets demonized Lavalas supporters as “gangs” and “supporters of violence,” and justified the foreign-backed destabilization and overthrow of the constitutional government.

The New York Times published 642 pieces that mentioned Haiti between March 1, 2004 and

May 1, 2006—close to one a day. But only four dealt with the violence against and persecution of members and supporters of the former government. While the New York Times reported (10/26/04) on the imprisonment of Father Gerard Jean-Juste, a pro-Aristide priest imprisoned for political reasons, it failed to investigate the nearly 1,000 other political prisoners, many underfed and living in dilapidated jails for more than two years without being charged.

Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Times had 244 pieces mentioning Haiti from March 1, 2004 to May 1, 2006, but only five discussed—briefly—the violent persecution of Lavalas supporters. At the same time, the paper managed to cover every single death of a MINUSTAH soldier.

Well over half of all the quotes in L.A. Times articles dealing entirely with Haiti came from official sources. One L.A. Times article covered the imprisonment of former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune (7/5/05), but failed to mention the evidentiary weakness of the charges leveled against him by a U.S.-funded NGO (Baltimore Sun, 5/29/05), or that there were nearly a thousand other political prisoners languishing in the jails of the interim government.

With a smaller international section, USA Today had 13 articles specifically on Haiti between March 1, 2004 and May 1, 2006. Two (1/4/05, 9/27/05) were critical of the Latortue government, citing its involvement in human rights violations. One of these was followed by a rebuttal from Roger Noriega (1/12/05), then assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs and a primary architect of the 2004 coup. USA Today's pieces also showed an extreme source bias toward U.S. government and U.S.-installed interim government officials. In its articles, seven U.S. government officials, one U.N. official and 16 Haitian government officials were quoted, compared with only one human rights official and one member of Lavalas.

NPR, according to its website, had approximately 79 stories covering Haiti between March 1, 2004 and May 1, 2006. Only three mentioned violence against Lavalas supporters (10/4/04, 10/7/04, 1/25/06), all of these placing the majority of the blame on pro-Aristide "political and gang" violence, failing to interview victims of state-sponsored or U.N. violence. The role of MINUSTAH and the HNP was almost completely ignored.

The introductions of sources in articles covering Haiti illustrates the reliance on official sources: "diplomats say," "an anonymous diplomat says," "a source involved in the palace brainstorming," "a U.S. diplomat in Port-au-Prince said," "U.N. officials say," "Haitian police say," "USAID workers explain," "a member of Haiti's electoral council said," "the new commander of the U.N. peacekeeping force assured," "council members said," "interim officials say," "State Department officials say," etc. Rarely, if ever, do we read what the wounded, imprisoned and exiled say—the testimonies that don't sustain the official story.

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