

MINUSTAH: Haiti under Military Occupation

By [Dady Chery](#)

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Photograph: Ben Depp

As one of his first measures in office, Brazilian Defense Minister Celso Amorim plans to conclude Brazil's participation in the notorious United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). Various sectors of the Brazilian government, including Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs agree with Mr. Amorim, who says that the important thing now is to formulate an exit strategy.



Brazilian Defense Minister Celso Amorim Mr. Amorim was sworn in on Thursday August 4th and only took office the following Monday, but as early as Saturday he held a meeting at the Presidential Palace with Brazil's Army commanders and Joint Chiefs of Staff to discuss a

possible draw down of the troops. [According to one participant](#) in this meeting, there was a “convergence of opinion” about the Brazilian troops.

It is appropriate that the Brazilians should be first to leave Haiti. After all, the insertion of UN troops into the country began as a Brazilian project in the early days of Lula’s presidency. It was part of the campaign by Brazil to prove its worthiness in matters of world security so as to earn a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Mr. Amorim, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, was one of the main architects of Brazil’s participation.

The troops started arriving in June 2004, barely one month after Aristide’s kidnapping, to buttress the illegal administration that followed the coup. The first MINUSTAH commander, a Brazilian, complained of the pressure to use violence and resigned his position by fall 2005. The second commander, another Brazilian, committed suicide by January 2006. The force has continued to grow, with the Brazilian contingent now numbering 2,160 men, although in Brazil this military adventure has been controversial from the start. [Mr. Amorim attributes](#) his sudden change of heart to Haiti’s “growing economy and gradual return to democratic normalcy.”

There are many reasons why MINUSTAH should go, but Mr. Amorim’s justifications do not qualify for my top-ten list below.

1. MINUSTAH continually harasses and humiliates Haitians. MINUSTAH’s favorite activities include pepper spraying Haitians and capriciously confiscating drivers’ licenses and computers.
2. Common criminals in MINUSTAH enjoy immunity from prosecution. Though over 100 troops have been expelled from Haiti for child prostitution and related charges, MINUSTAH soldiers have enjoyed immunity for most of their crimes, including numerous rapes and the suffocation in August 2010 of a Haitian teenager working on a Nepalese MINUSTAH base.
3. MINUSTAH subverts democracy. Together with the U.S., Canada, and France, MINUSTAH fixed elections that excluded 80% of the Haitian electorate and brought a duvalierist, Michel Martelly, back into power in May 2011.
4. MINUSTAH interferes in Haiti’s political affairs. Former MINUSTAH head Edmond Mulet recommended that criminal charges be brought against Haiti’s legitimate President, Mr. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, so as to keep him illegally out of Haiti.
5. MINUSTAH serves as an occupation force. MINUSTAH troops, together with Haitian paramilitaries, [ambushed and gunned down](#) over 4,000 members of Fanmi Lavalas (Aristide’s party) soon after Aristide was deposed in 2004 in a coup plotted by the U.S., Canada, France, and Haiti’s elite.
6. MINUSTAH has operated as a large anti-Aristide gang. MINUSTAH conducted numerous raids on slums such as Cité Soleil so as to kill civilians who supported Aristide. In some of these raids MINUSTAH soldiers fired tens of thousands of rounds at dwellings and schools. (*See the video below.*)
7. MINUSTAH troops showed spectacular cowardice after the earthquake of January 2010. During the first 36 hours after the earthquake, the troops hardly assisted Haitians and instead searched for each other.
8. MINUSTAH harbors vandals and vectors of disease. In October 2010 [MINUSTAH introduced a cholera epidemic](#) into Haiti. So far the epidemic has killed over 5,900 Haitians. [MINUSTAH covered up](#) the fact that several Nepalese soldiers

arrived in Haiti sick with cholera and still lies about its role in the epidemic. [As recently as August 6, 2011](#), MINUSTAH was continuing to dump its fecal matter in Haiti's rivers.

9. The presence of UN troops on Haitian soil is illegal. Haiti's MINUSTAH is the only UN force in a country that is not at war.
10. The Haitian people despise MINUSTAH. Haitians at home and abroad, young and old, rich and poor, have made it known that they want MINUSTAH out of Haiti. Common epithets for the troops are "Volè kabrit!" (Goat thief!), "Kakachwet!" (Shitter!), "Koléra!" and "Pédofil!"



[The UN is regularly updated](#) about MINUSTAH's crimes, which are well known to the great majority of Mr. Amorim's compatriots. All know that Haiti was better off in 2004 when the troops first entered the country than in the months preceding the earthquake, and they have loudly objected to their country's participation in a foreign occupation. An especially eloquent example was Mr. Ricardo Seitenfus, who lost his post as the Brazilian Representative to the OAS in Haiti soon after speaking up in an interview last December. [Mr. Seitenfus](#) had this to say:

"The UN system currently in place to prevent disputes is inappropriate for Haiti. Haiti is not an international threat. We are not in the midst of a civil war. Haiti is not Iraq or Afghanistan.... But it looks to me as if, on the international scene, Haiti is paying mainly for its proximity to the U.S. Haiti has long been an object of negative attention from the international system. It took the UN to coalesce this power and transform Haitians into prisoners of their own island."

But the Brazilian calls to withdraw from Haiti have fallen on deaf ears. The real reasons for the coming withdrawal are to be found in the current Brazilian politico-economic situation and a recent ruling by a Dutch court.

[Since 2004, Brazil's taxpayers](#) have spent over R\$ 1 billion on MINUSTAH. Last year alone

maintenance of the Brazilian troops in Haiti cost R\$ 426 million: R\$ 140 million for annual costs and other expenditures, plus R\$ 286 million for humanitarian aid sent after an earthquake. In principle, the UN should reimburse these expenses, but in recent years the reimbursements have amounted to only 16% of the payments made by the Brazilian government. In addition the salaries of Brazil's MINUSTAH troops have exceeded R\$ 41 million per year, but these costs are excluded from Brazil's expenses on the mission because these individuals would be entitled to their pay if they were in Brazil. The Brazilian government has long known about this bloodletting, of course, but it has grit its teeth and maintained the arrangement as a political bribe to the U.S. in return for a seat on the Security Council. In more than seven years, this seat has not materialized.

As high as the current costs of MINUSTAH might appear, there will likely be more to pay. In a landmark decision last month, a [Dutch court ruled](#) the Netherlands government liable for the failure of its UN soldiers to protect three Bosnian Muslim men from being killed by Serbs during the 1995 Srebrenica massacre. Until now, UN soldiers accused of crimes had been merely discharged. This decision allows the possibility of suing the countries participating in UN forces for the crimes of their soldiers. Given Brazil's role in the formation of MINUSTAH, the Brazilian government might be liable for all of MINUSTAH's crimes. In any case, Brazilian troops in Haiti stand accused of the murders of Aristide partisans and numerous sexual assaults.

The notorious 2006 Cité Soleil massacre involving these troops was captured on the video provided below. People killed by high powered rifles and M50s fired from helicopter gunships included children, pregnant women and unarmed men at 4 a.m. as they slept in their beds. 24 year old Lelene Mertina was shot inside her home and survived but lost her 6 month old baby. A young school teacher was shot and killed inside his home but while dying said he was shot from a helicopter gunship. The UN was fully aware of who they were killing but denied it despite photographic evidence. (*See the video provided below.*) The MINUSTAH attacks were retribution for mounting massive demonstrations by the people who were demanding the return of Aristide to Haiti.



The week before the UN attack there were several huge demonstrations in Cité Soleil demanding the return of ousted president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Residents believe that the UN justification for the attack, to arrest a base of kidnappers, was really a cover for collective punishment against the community for continuing demonstrations like these. - [Haiti Action](#)

Some Brazilian hardliners, such as member of the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Campinas (Unicamp) Geraldo Cavagnari, [continue to say](#) that “the troops should stay put because there is no risk, and there are many things in play.”

Everybody understands this to mean that the Security Council seat might yet come, and besides, Haitians are harmless, so why not continue to parasitize them? Retired Brazilian General and former MINUSTAH commander [August Heleno](#) has been more pointed in his warning to Amorim against giving the armed forces a “left-wing ideological imprint.” One suspects that Cavagnari and Heleno are unaware of the Dutch court decision, or the fact that Haitians are not being so inoffensive these days. The introduction of cholera into the country immediately after the murder of 16-year old Gerard Jean Gilles ignited such fierce battles between Haitians and UN troops that the UN had to call a curfew for its troops. Countless protests have taken place at home and abroad, and the protest calls are gradually [changing to demands for reparation](#). One proposal is that MINUSTAH’s current budget of \$2.5 million per day should go toward compensating the cholera victims and providing potable water to Haitians. As we say in Haiti, “Ayibobo!” (Amen!)

Dutch courts aside, in Brazil the political winds are now blowing in an entirely different direction. Reactionary voices like those of Heleno and Cavagnari are quieting down as the relatives of murdered leftists increasingly pressure their country to create a Truth Commission to investigate and punish the crimes of Brazil’s 21-year dictatorship. Already [three military commanders have been forced to resign](#). Indeed, Mr. Amorim owes his position partly to the ditherings of former Defense Minister Nelson Jobim about the Truth Commission.

Gone are the days when the wealthy owners of Brazil’s apparel companies such as [ABIT and AFRABAS](#) held their country’s coffers and politicians with such a firm grip that they could commandeer thousands of their citizens to guard their sweatshops abroad. [Only months before the earthquake](#), delegations of Brazil’s rich strutted along Port-au-Prince’s waterfront, together with Haitian sweatshop magnate Fritz Mevs and former U.S. President Clinton, dreaming of possible sites for their future West Indies Free Zone. But things fell apart since the earthquake, not only in Haiti, but all around. [The Brazilian Defense Ministry](#) is being forced to trim its budget because the country’s growth has slowed.

Those of us who want to see Haiti regain its independence would do well to support the Brazilian efforts toward a Truth Commission and all projects everywhere to bring UN soldiers to account for their crimes. The search for Truth has so far succeeded where much else has failed. In Haiti, where “growth” typically means everything from sweatshop labor to slavery, and “democracy” means everything from fixed elections to outright occupation, we could do with a little less growth and democracy and a little more Truth right now.

Since Mr. Amorim seems to be at a loss for an exit strategy, I would like to suggest one: how about packing the bags of MINUSTAH’s troops, trucking them to Toussaint Louverture Airport, and putting them on the next TAM flights to Rio?

The departure of the Brazilian troops should spell the beginning of the end for MINUSTAH. The Brazilians are its largest contingent, with more than a quarter of the total number of troops.

The rest come from:

Argentina, Bolivia, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, France, Guatemala, Japan, Jordan, Nepal, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, U.S., Uruguay.

Since many of the crimes by these troops are well known and can be readily documented for lawsuits, these countries too will soon discover that their “peacekeeping” costs have become burdensome.

One is tempted to ask why south American states, with presumably leftist and nationalistic governments, like Bolivia and Ecuador support the occupation of Haiti. After all, Cuba and Venezuela have amply demonstrated how much more can be achieved by contributing medical doctors and public-health workers, instead of soldiers, to Haiti. But not everything needs to be said during this leave taking. It is better to show the remaining MINUSTAH members the door and advise they not slam it on their way out.

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Aristide’s welcoming committee when he was finally permitted to return to Haiti on March 18, 2011 as a result of the demands of the Haitian people. [Read more ...](#)



When Aristide returned, huge crowds flooded into the grounds around his home, scaling the walls and covering the roof.

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