

Lifting U.S. Arms Embargo Against Haiti: The Wrong Message to Send[†]



Presently the crisis continues in Haiti, a region mired with political protest and rampant violence.

At least 740 people have been killed in criminal and political aggression since September, following the ousting of Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide in early 2004.¹

The bloody rebellion against the democratically-elected President Aristide forced him into exile and divided the country into numerous political factions of pro- and anti-Aristide supporters, criminals and government police forces.

Although the escalating bloodshed has come from all sides of the Haitian movements and has proven to stem from the country's disastrous economic situation, the United States has conjured up a new plan to help end the killing: provide more weapons.

The U.S. is currently working on a deal which will lift the previous arms embargo on Haiti, allowing the U.N.-appointed interim government to provide a greater amount of weapons to military and police forces, according to U.S. ambassador James Foley.

According to Foley, the State Department and Congress are working on an arrangement that would allow the Haitian government to purchase weapons in the U.S., to ensure the necessary security in time for the local and presidential elections slated for October and November.

Despite the State Department's call for a better equipped Haitian National Police (HNP), convincing evidence from recent events has proven the deadly impact of arming a police force that is seemingly opposed to dissenting political opinions. Several human rights groups have accused the HNP of numerous human rights abuses within the last several months, including executions and abuses against supporters of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Just last week, at least 23 people were killed, and more than a dozen homes set fire during police raids in the district of Bel-Air in Port-au-Prince.² According to family members and close friends of the victims, the raids were politically motivated stunts intended to suppress specific groups which are predominantly pro-Aristide.

"The police know full well (who the victims are) but their objective, in targeting the entire population, is to empty the populist districts in anticipation of elections, whose progress is stalled," said several residents of Bel-Air.³

A month earlier in Port-Au-Prince, police openly fired on protestors demanding the release of detainees loyal to President Aristide, killing at least five young men, according to U.N. officials and eyewitnesses. The incident marked the third time in three months that HNP forces have fatally opened fire on demonstrators in Haiti's capital.⁴

Despite the 14-year-old arms embargo imposed on Haiti by the U.S., the HNP has remained significantly armed due to a few exceptions in the weapons agreement. Last year,

Washington donated around 2,600 handguns and 21 semiautomatic rifles and submachine guns to the HNP, according to the State Department.⁵

A senior Democratic Congresswoman on the House International Relations Committee, Barbara Lee, recently called for full disclosure from the State Department regarding weapons sales to Haiti and the potential arms embargo violations. In a public statement last week, Congresswoman Lee criticized the U.S. and its role of arming an oppressive police force.

“If the goal is to create an environment of security and safety in Haiti, the United States cannot be complicit in arming the very criminals responsible for raping, murdering, and torturing hundreds of Haitians,” said Lee.⁶

Regardless of the overwhelming evidence of human rights violations carried out by the HNP, U.S. officials and the interim government have continued to solely blame pro-Aristide supporters for causing the widespread violence and attempting to disrupt upcoming U.N. assisted elections.

The election for local government officials is scheduled for October 9th, while legislative and presidential elections are set for November 13th. Numerous public officials, including a member of the Haitian Electoral Council organizing elections in the fall, have urged the postponing of the elections due to the reoccurring violence and instability.

The U.S. has continued to make a push to return democracy to the Haitian government, but has failed to first solve the roots of Haiti’s political problems.

Haiti’s social unrest is a result of an increasingly stagnant economic picture, as it remains the poorest country in the western hemisphere. The country’s main exports, coffee, mangos, and rum have been adversely affected by overproduction in other poor country’s and trade subsidies given to wealthy countries, causing an overwhelming wealth gap between the Creole-speaking black majority and the French-speaking mulattos, 1% of whom own nearly half of the country’s wealth. Along with a bleak economic situation--50% of Haiti’s population is illiterate and undernourished⁷--Haiti has the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in Latin America and the Caribbean-affecting 5.6 % of the adult population (15-49 years).⁸

Unable to provide for its citizens, the Haitian government has been highly dependant on foreign aid from the U.S., the European Union, and the World Bank. However, the U.S. has virtually cut off foreign aid to Haiti since the 2000 elections, claiming that 70% of assistance makes its way into the pockets of corrupt officials.⁹

Before attempting to quell violence with violence, the U.S. must initially seek to understand these underlying causes of Haitian despair, and recognize the correlation between political and economic turbulence. Haiti’s escalating wealth gap and social deprivation must be addressed, in order to end the corruption and common distrust in government, which has failed the Haitian people time and time again.

However, providing a combination of sufficient aid and trade opportunity in order to recreate Haiti's economic infrastructure, is only half of the necessary action that must take place to ensure solid government institutions. The U.S. has also failed to end the hypocrisy in its own Caribbean and Latin American foreign policy, which has remained a dark chapter in its history books for decades.

Strong evidence of double-standards in foreign policy is found within the Bush Doctrine, which will perhaps form the lasting impression of President George W. Bush and his administration. Unveiled in 2002, the Bush Doctrine sets forth to "actively promoting democracy and freedom in all regions of the world," likely shaping foreign policy and U.S. political principles for years to come.¹⁰ However, supporting Haitian police forces and an interim government, who have consistently suppressed the rights and freedoms that a stable democracy provides, proves dangerously contradictory to the creeds of the Bush doctrine and sends the wrong message to the world.

In fact, a recent investigation of Haiti's Human Rights situation, led by former federal law enforcement officer Thomas Griffin, has found that the conditions in the country have sharply deteriorated since the installation of the interim government. The report concludes that "life for the impoverished majority is becoming more violent and more inhuman as the months pass since the elected government's removal," calling into question the U.S. rationale for supporting this regime.¹¹

Before trade barriers can be lifted, foreign aid provided, and political elections occur, it is essential that U.S. and global forces ensure a halt in discriminate killing by government-backed security forces. Providing additional weapons will only strengthen the social divide and further the descent towards an autocratic government.

Order can only be accomplished by increasing and prolonging the mandate for the "neutral" U.N. stabilization force. The current presence of U.N. troops is 7,400 with a mandate through July, although UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has recommended troops remain for a further year to ensure security.¹²

President Bush stated at West Point in 2002, "America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish. We wish for others only what we wish for ourselves--safety from violence, the rewards of liberty, and the hope for a better life."¹³

Recreating democratic institutions within Haiti remains a daunting task, but by no means is an impossible dream, so long as the U.S. and other great powers provide sufficient economic assistance, ensure a stable U.N. troop presence, and remain consistent with their message. The U.S. must step away from its gross interference in Haitian affairs--represented most recently in Haiti by the nod that was given to the coup that ousted President Aristide--and develop a steadfast approach toward helping Haiti to achieve stability, self-determined and sustainable economic development, and full democracy.

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¹ Reuters. Accessed on 12 June. 2005. <http://www.mattapanonline.org/haitian_police_set_fire.htm>

² AHP News. “At least 23 people have been killed and more than a dozen homes set on fire during raids by the police in the populist district of Bel-Air.” Accessed on 12 June. 2005. <<http://www.ahphaiti.org/eng.html>>

³ AHP News. “At least 23 people have been killed and more than a dozen homes set on fire during raids by the police in the populist district of Bel-Air.” Accessed on 12 June. 2005. <<http://www.ahphaiti.org/eng.html>>

⁴ Associated Press. “Amnesty International condemns Haitian police for political killings, police deny charges.” Accessed on 12 June. 2005 <http://www.haiti-news.com/article.php3?id_article=3603>

⁵ Boston Globe. “US Plan would allow Haiti to buy weapons” Accessed on 12 June. 2005 <http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2005/06/09/nato_set_to_airlift_troops_into_darfur>

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⁸ UNICEF. “At a glance: Haiti.” Accessed on 15 June. 2005 <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/haiti_statistics.html>

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¹³ Wikipedia Encyclopedia. “Bush Doctrine.” Accessed on 12 June.2005 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bush_doctrine>