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Ms. Hilaire's Haiti

As recently as September 19th of this year, Ms. Saint Hilaire, a thirty-three year old camp leader in Haiti who lost her husband and her livelihood and who finds “herself hungry without school, a health clinic or a marketplace” wrote ‘We don’t want to die of hunger....’ The *New York Times* article reported that “thousands of displaced Haitians have similarly vented their concerns”...This is “from a population that has felt increasingly impotent and ignored.” (NYT, September 19, 2010)

While it is tempting to blame the most recent earthquake for Haiti’s current woes and its people’s suffering, the blame extends beyond nature throughout decades and whirls of poverty, health/water/environmental/and agricultural problems as well as dysfunctional and corrupt judicial and political systems. What might Ms. Saint Hilaire’s life been prior to the earthquake? Prior to the current challenges, what was Haiti like?

If she is typical, chances are good Saint Hilaire lived in poverty, even prior to the earthquake, in a rural area. She speaks Creole, has no education, but she enjoys an extended family consisting of many ‘half’ siblings and offspring. She most likely practices Voodoo. Basic necessities, including water and food, may not have existed in good quality or quantity even before the earthquake. She ate rice and beans and some fresh fruits. She wears colorful clothing made of cotton, but she doesn’t have much. She was and still is irritated at her government, but she accepts corruption as the norm.

Well known as the poorest and most vulnerable nation in the Western Hemisphere, the average income of this country was less than \$260 dollars per year and over 69% of Creole-speaking Haitians were unemployed. *The New York Times* of July 12, 2010 reported that “The country is, by a significant margin, the poorest in the Western Hemisphere, with four out of five people living in poverty and more than half in abject poverty.” Earlier, in 1998 it was reported that “eighty percent of the rural population – which accounts for 70 percent of Haiti’s people – already fails to get its daily recommended calorie requirement and the annual per capita income is \$250, compared to \$1460 in the neighboring Dominican Republic, also a poor country.” (*The Miami Herald*, Nov. 13, 1998) Those who fled to the overcrowded cities fared equally poorly. However, Haiti also had about two hundred millionaire families and about 3000 families who made over \$90,000 a year in the country’s tiny elite class. A huge gap exists between the elite and middle class who make \$1000 to \$3000 dollars a year. For the most part, Haitians are impoverished.

Family life is very important in Haiti and an extended family is considered a part of the family unit as people typically live together or close by. Genders share duties and children often work rather than attend school. Their educational system that involves rote learning, mostly in French, began with kindergarten through twelfth grade, yet most Haitians were financially unable to attend school, even before the 2010 disaster.

“Placage” is not a legal marriage, but is fully accepted by society and eighty-five percent of the families practice placage. Individuals may have multiple placages in their life and children are all considered siblings. Such family arrangements are endorsed by the religions of the country

which include Catholicism and Protestant while Voodoo is practiced by a majority of the population.

Haiti has too many people for remaining natural resources. Its forests have been cut down and its topsoil washed into the sea. *New York Times* of July 12, 2010 reported that “Deforestation and over-farming have left much of Haiti eroded and barren, undermining subsistence farming efforts, driving up food prices and leaving the country even more vulnerable to natural disasters.” Its long history of political instability and corruption has added to the turmoil. Even with depleted forests and soil erosion, Haiti’s few farmers once eeked out some crops of rice, corn, bananas, mangos, avacados, coffee, millet, beans, sorghum, sugar cane, tobacco and cotton, but not enough to support its people. CNN of May 21, 2002 reported that “(f)ew Haitian people have access to clean water in Haiti, and most must pay for it.” The lack of clean water and poor or unavailable health care is another concern. As one CARE aid official put it “What’s a minor cold in another country is a major case of pneumonia in Haiti.” (*The Miami Herald*, Nov. 13, 1998)

So, Ms.Saint Hilaire’s country was not a picture of prosperity before being hit by its usual natural disasters. Haiti sits on a large fault that has caused catastrophic quakes in the past. In 1998 Hurricane Georges took out 60% of the country’s food crops and killed two hundred people. (*The Miami Herald*, Nov. 13, 1998) Hurricanes Gustav, Hanna and Ike and Tropical Storm Fay occurred in September 2008 that caused a “total of \$900 million of damage, or nearly 15 percent of the gross domestic product. The national toll was 800 dead.” (*NYT*, July 12, 2010) Then the most recent earth quake, the strongest to hit Haiti in two hundred years left a ‘death roll of over 220,000 persons and over 300,000 injured in an already fragile nation. Some two million persons have been displaced from their homes and some 1.6 million of them remain in overcrowded displacement camps...(S)ixty percent of the government’s infrastructure destroyed....” (Unicef) *The New York Times* reported that “Six months after the earthquake, only 28,000 of the 1.5 million Haitians displaced had moved into new homes...”(*NYT*, July 12, 2010)

While it is handy to blame nature for Haiti’s troubles, human kind might point to a history of failed, inept, and corrupt politics – a failed state -- that strangles Haiti from a road to true recovery. From Jean-Claude Dvalier to President Preval, the political scene has not been the best. Jean-Claude Dvalier came to power (through questionable ‘elections’) in 1971. He freed the press, but arrested union leaders, journalist, and human rights advocates. He was replaced by provisional governments. Haiti then suffered four military coups since 1986 when an uprising brought an end to the Duvalier family’s twenty eight year dictatorship. Aristide came into power. Jean-Bertrand Aristide served as Haiti’s first democratically elected president, but it wasn’t smooth sailing for him. CNN reported on July 14, 2001 that “The Organization of America States...mediated...talks between Haiti’s ruling party and the opposition...(President Jean Bertrand-Aristide’s Lavalas party) Lavalas swept more than 80 percent of some 7,000 elected posts. The 15-party Convergence opposition alliance said the elections were rigged to favor Aristide’s party. In 1994, President Clinton sent 20,000 US soldiers to Haiti to restore Aristide to power after three years of repressive military-backed rule. Mr. Aristide now lives in exile in South Africa. Haiti had been without a prime minister since June 1997...Political instability grew throughout Fall 2003. (Global Security, 2010) President Preval is the current President of Haiti. Bickering over fraud in Haiti’s last election, in 1997, led to a feud between the majority party in Parliament and President Rene Preval. After that election (in 1997) about 29,400 candidates had contested 7,625 posts in the national legislature, mayoral commissions, and local and rural councils. Preval refused to recognize the vote to end the parliament. The parliament responded by charging Preval with trying to rule as a dictator. A little hope exists for the future in politics as the August 6, 2010 *NYT* describes Wyclef Jean as a would-be “Hip-Hop” President. He grew up in New Jersey and is friends of the Haitian ambassador to the United States who encouraged him

to run. Yet, it is also reported that Wyclef Jean has little management experience (*NYT*, August 6, 2010.) A question exists as to whether or not Wyclef Jean can legitimately run because he hasn't resided in the country for five consecutive years. Yet, on the positive note, since he has lived in the United States, and he understands the value of a legitimate and non-corrupt democracy.

All of this political ineptness of past years and failed leadership hurts the country and its people as well as its recovery from disasters. It has always been the case. Take the year 2000 as an example. (A)t stake is a \$500 million in international aid that has been suspended until Haiti sets up a constitutional government. The money is desperately needed in a country where 65% of the work force is unemployed. (CNN, May 23, 2000) According to CNN of May 21, 2002 “(L)oan(s) to improve access to potable water is on hold because of Haiti’s political crisis, hampering even modest progress...” (CNN May 21, 2002) Because of their politics, major donors blocked the release of loans...meanwhile the WHO estimated only 46% of Haiti’s 8 million people have safe drinking water and “because infections and diseases spread through contaminated water (and) are a leading cause of death.” During the Bush administration, then Secretary of State Colin Power said that Haiti had not done enough to move the political process forward to assure that aid would be used in the most effective way. The bottom line is that corruption and ineptness limits sincere efforts to help the country of Haiti and its people.

Add to that is the lack of an effective judicial system. Haiti has never developed a civic culture – widespread acceptance of the rule of law and institutions strong enough to enforce laws and legal decision—to replace the exercise of violence as a means to political power. The Foreign Affairs and International Trade Commission of Canada explains that law in Haiti has not evolved since the 1800s and that the Haitian judicial reform is impeded by a number of social and logistic restrictions such as the lack of an independent magistracy and the absence of civil service security (2010). Language, too, is a factor since French is used in the courts and most people speak Creole.

A few signs of hopefulness are taking place. Women are considered a crucial part of a new coupon system for distributing rice in Haiti. (*NYT*, July 12, 2010) At the end of January, a new United Nations system of food distribution began, with coupons being handed out that qualify their recipients – primarily women – for 55 pounds of rice. The new approach eased the confusion surrounding aid, thought by some estimates, only a third of those who need it were receiving food.” Also, improvement has been seen in humanitarian support. “The United States and other countries have devoted significant humanitarian support to Haiti, financing a large United Nations peacekeeping mission that has recently reported major gains in controlling crime. International aid has also supported an array of organizations aimed at raising the country’s dismal health and education levels.” (*NYT*, July 12, 2010)

Further assistance should be made through the judicial, political, military, and humanitarian expertise of the United States. We have plenty of lawyers and legal aid experts who have volunteered in other countries across the globe and could do so in Haiti. The United States Secretary of State needs to get involved to lay the foundation for legal aide assistance. Mr. Crowley of the US State Department said about the upcoming Haitian election in his daily press briefing of September 15, 2010 that “(I)t is something that we are working diligently with Haitian authorities to help them prepare. It is vitally important to Haiti’s future that there be a credible election.”

Meanwhile, our troops, along with others interested from the countries of the Organization of American States, in peacekeeping status, should be on hand to clear the way for effective

international assistance and while political reform is done with Western and European (French) assistance. If NATO can assist in government formation in Iraq, and in Afghanistan, we should be able to do it in Haiti. From there, developmental aide and business contracts can take place. The people of Haiti can gain an education as supported by businesses that commit to do on-the-job training. This would put the people to work while enhancing the skills and knowledge of their workforce. This should begin with the textile industry that Haiti already has expertise in. Then, we should look to see what products, currently imported from China, can best be made by companies to be established in Haiti. There is a way to do this without exploitation while maintaining the standards we would expect in our own country. Also, any policy must pay attention to the women of the country. Small loans, micro-loans, should go to the women first. This has been shown in other lesser-developed countries to be effective. Women care for their children, educate their children, and repay the loans. Women in Haiti and elsewhere are resourceful, fiscally conservative, and devoted to their families. This will be the building block for a successful Haiti. We owe it to Ms.Saint Hilaire and others like her to be a good partner to Haiti and help the country from the most dismal of the Western Hemisphere to a country that is one of many, with a decent quality of life for its citizens under a legitimate and just political, judicial and social structure.

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