

HAITI - Haiti, MINUSTAH, and Latin America: Solidaridad?

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IRC - Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez found a hero's welcome when he visited Haiti on March 12. People from Port-au-Prince's poor neighborhoods lined the streets of the capitol to cheer, chant, dance, and sing, with all the infectious enthusiasm of Haitian celebrations.

President Chávez returned the affection. He jumped from his motorcade and joined the party, marching, even running with the crowd. At the National Palace, Chávez climbed up on the perimeter fence to slap hands like he had just scored a World Cup goal. He publicly thanked the Haitian people for their hospitality and enthusiasm, and for their historic support for liberty in the world.

President Chávez and the Haitian people hit it off so well for reasons of principle and of practice. Haitians consider Chávez a leader in the fight against the global inequalities that keep people in Haiti, Venezuela, and the rest of Latin America poor, hungry, and uneducated. They admire him for standing up to the most powerful leader in the world, George Bush (whose name was frequently invoked that day, not charitably), and to the World Bank and other powerbrokers. Even better, unlike their former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (whose name was frequently, and charitably, invoked), Chávez keeps getting away with it.

In turn, Chávez knows that the Haitian people have been standing up to inequality and oppression for more than 200 years. He knows that Haitians won their independence in 1804 by beating Napoleon—the most powerful leader of his day—and that Haiti became the first country to abolish slavery. Chávez knows, and acknowledged at the National Palace, that Haiti played a critical role in his own country's independence. He also understands that the Haitian people are still fighting for their sovereignty, and will keep fighting as long as necessary.

President Chávez was also welcomed because he came bearing much-needed gifts. At the Palace, he signed a US\$100 million agreement with Haiti's President Préval to provide Venezuelan oil, development assistance, and financial aid for the Cuba/Haiti partnership that supports Cuban medical professionals in Haiti's poorest areas and trains Haitian healthworkers in Cuban medical schools (Fidel Castro joined the Chávez-Préval meeting by phone). These gifts are particularly welcome because unlike the North American and European donors, Venezuela and Cuba do not condition their largesse on Haiti decreasing social spending or restructuring its economy to benefit multi-national corporations.

This public display of mutual affection contrasts sharply with the Haitian poor's relationship with other Latin Americans in Haiti, a relationship that is increasingly hostile. A few days before Chávez' visit, Edmond Mulet of Guatemala, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, told Brazil's Folha newspaper that "a photo of Haiti today would reveal a horrible situation: poverty, the absence of institutions, debility, and the absence of the State." Brazil's Ambassador to Haiti, Paulo Cordeiro Andrade Pinto, told the newspaper that President Préval was "passive" and "sluggish."

Ambassadors Mulet and Andrade Pinto do not jump from their motorcades to join Port-au-Prince's street celebrations. They travel as quickly as possible between their homes in wealthy neighborhoods and their offices in wealthy neighborhoods, with armed escorts in large cars, windows tinted and rolled up, air-conditioning on. Their employees, the soldiers of MINUSTAH, the United Nations (UN) "peacekeeping" mission that Mulet directs and Brazil leads, do go to poor neighborhoods, but when they do they stay in armored personnel vehicles, their automatic weapons, rather than their hands, extended to the Haitian

people.

Too often, UN Mission Has a Different Definition of Peace

MINUSTAH troops sometimes do more with their guns than just point. In December, January, and February, they conducted repeated assaults on the crowded, poor neighborhood of Cité Soleil. MINUSTAH spokespeople claimed the troops were pursuing gang members, but their automatic rifles shot enough high-powered bullets into Cité Soleil's thin-walled houses (MINUSTAH estimates it shot 22,000 bullets in one 2005 raid) to kill dozens of people—women, children, the elderly—with no connection to gang activity.

Mulet diplomatically refers to the civilians as "collateral damage." They are collateral enough that MINUSTAH did not transport any of the civilians wounded in the December and January raids to hospitals. UN ambulances were on the scene, but for soldiers only.

The neighborhoods that MINUSTAH hits hardest—Cité Soleil, but also Bel-Air and others—supplied the crowds that greeted President Chávez with such enthusiasm. They are also the urban base of Haiti's Lavalas movement, which supplied the votes that gave landslide victories to Presidents Aristide and Pr é val in 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2006. The neighborhoods never accepted the February 2004 overthrow of their constitutional government, sponsored by the United States, Canada, and France, or Aristide's forced exile to Africa on a U.S. government plane. Nor have they accepted MINUSTAH, the only peacekeeping mission in UN history deployed without a peace agreement.

MINUSTAH's mission was to consolidate George Bush's coup d'état. It originally supported the brutal and unconstitutional Interim Government of Haiti (IGH), led by Prime Minister G érard Latortue, a Bush supporter and television host flown in from Boca Raton, Florida. The mission backed up the IGH police force's campaign of terror against Lavalas, and included MINUSTAH attacks in the poor neighborhoods. After Haiti's return to democracy in May 2006, the Haitian police stopped their murderous raids in places like Cité Soleil. But MINUSTAH, under pressure from the Bush administration and Haitian elites to take a "hard line" against the poor neighborhoods, keeps shooting.

People in Cité Soleil do not minimize gang violence—like the poor everywhere else, they bear the largest burden of street crime. But they believe that the violence will never be defeated by violence and that the situation can only be successfully remedied with healthcare, jobs, and dignified living conditions. Those are the weapons deployed by President Chávez, and by former President Aristide, who provided jobs to Cité Soleil's youth. Week after week, Haitians take to the streets, to call for MINUSTAH to leave and for President Aristide to come back. On March 12, along with "Viv Chávez, Viv Aristide," they chanted "Aba Bush, Aba MINUSTAH."

MINUSTAH at least understands the appeal of President Chávez' generosity. After negative publicity following the December and January raids in Cité Soleil, the mission's communications department started stressing its efforts to win the hearts and minds of Cité Soleil by providing healthcare, water, and food in areas where they dislodged gang members. In March, Cité Soleil residents brought me to a basketball court, near a suspected gang headquarters. That same day, glowing press reports, complete with photos of MINUSTAH's humanitarian work, were posted on the Internet. Brazilian Colonel Afonso Pedrosa bragged that MINUSTAH had provided 200 bottles of water and 1,000 plates of food to the people, to show that things had really changed with the gangs' departure.

MINUSTAH converted the basketball court into a showcase of change in Cité Soleil. The day the peacekeepers took over, the court was quickly transformed into a busy humanitarian center, with water and food distribution centers and a field hospital. But the Cité Soleil residents told me the humanitarian center lasted only a day. After the photographers, reporters, and PR specialists had documented MINUSTAH's largesse, the whole operation was taken down. The humanitarian center quickly reverted to what I saw: a hot, dusty, basketball court. MINUSTAH soldiers reverted to patrolling Cité Soleil from armored personnel carriers, guns pointed out.

The Haitians I spoke with felt that MINUSTAH's "hearts and minds" campaign targeted the hearts and

minds of people that read newspapers and watch television in South America and the United States; the messages to Cité Soleil continue to be delivered by automatic rifle. The residents mock the cynicism of Ambassadors Mulet and Andrade Pinto and MINUSTAH by calling the mission "TOURISTAH."

The Bolivarian Alternative to Business as Usual

President Chávez and MINUSTAH are taking two different paths of solidarity in Haiti, both pioneered by Simon Bolivar, South America's Libertador. After a setback in his liberation work, Bolivar and his followers arrived in Haiti on Christmas Eve 1815, having been expelled from Venezuela, then pushed out of Jamaica. Haiti's President Pétion welcomed the freedom fighters, providing them shelter, guns, ammunition, and a printing press. Before departing to lead an uprising in Venezuela in April 1816, Bolivar asked how he could repay Haiti's generosity. Pétion replied the best thanks Haiti could receive would be the liberation of all the slaves in the Spanish colonies. Once in Venezuela, Bolivar the idealist freed the 1,500 slaves his family owned, and on July 6 printed a proclamation, on Pétion's printing press, abolishing slavery in Spanish America. Presidents Chávez and Préval commemorated this cooperation by placing flowers at Port-au-Prince's monuments to Pétion and Bolivar.

But Bolivar suffered another setback, and by September he was back in Haiti. Pétion again provided shelter and supplies, and Bolivar launched another attack in December 1816. This time he was successful, liberating a wide swath of territory from Venezuela to Bolivia. But this time the freedom he sought was more limited. El Libertador had become a "realist," willing to compromise his fundamental ideals to satisfy his allies. This time he did not print an emancipation proclamation, and Venezuela retained slavery and its horrors almost as long as the United States did—until 1854.

Bolivar also passed up other opportunities to thank Haiti for making his revolution possible. He did not recognize Haiti (Venezuela did not send an ambassador until 1874). When in 1826 the new Republic of Colombia organized the Congress of American States to bring together all the newly independent countries of the Americas, the "realists" acquiesced to the United States' request that Haiti, the country that had sheltered their freedom fighters, be excluded.

Some of Haiti's neighbors have taken the path of Bolivar the idealist. Cuba does not have Venezuela's oil and money, but it has trained doctors. For the last decade it has supported a team of over 800 Cuban medical professionals, deployed to Haiti's poorest and most remote areas. About the same number of Haitian students, many of them from poor families that could never afford medical school, are studying under scholarships in Cuba.

The Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) stood up for Haiti's democracy when it was under attack in 2004, calling for international support for the democracy and refusing to recognize the illegal replacement. CARICOM gave the rest of the world a civics lesson, by sticking to its democratic principles while the United States, Europe, and most of Central and South America (but not Venezuela) embraced the dictatorship.

But many of Haiti's other neighbors—generally the more powerful ones—have followed the path of Bolivar the realist and compromised their principles to satisfy potential allies. The Organization of American States (OAS) is a successor to the Congress of American States in more ways than one. In principle the OAS has stronger democracy requirements than CARICOM, but in practice the organization accepted Haiti's 2004 unconstitutional regime change without flinching. Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay have sent soldiers to join Brazil in MINUSTAH.

MINUSTAH's participants do know what they are doing, and it does trouble them. Lieutenant General Urano Bacellar, the Brazilian Commander of MINUSTAH, committed suicide in January 2006, apparently because he was unable to reconcile his duty to fulfill his "mission" of taking a hard line in poor neighborhoods with his moral convictions. His predecessor, General Augusto Heleno Ribeiro, complained to a Brazilian congressional commission that "we are under extreme pressure from the international community to use violence" in Haiti's poor neighborhoods. A year ago, Brazil's Folha interviewed returning Brazilian soldiers. One said "the name 'Peace Mission' is just to pacify the people. In reality no day goes by without the troops killing a Haitian in a shootout. I personally killed at least two ..."

But General Ribeiro's concern did not extend to poor Haitians who did not deserve to live, as determined from his Armored Personnel Carrier. He told Haiti's Radio Metropole in October 2004 that "we must kill the bandits but it will have to be the bandits only, not everybody."

So far Latin America's realists have been able to live with their consciences, confident that the advantages of participating in George Bush's idea of a peacekeeping force will yield benefits to compensate for what they are doing to the Haitian people. For Brazil the benefits include an improved chance of a permanent seat on a potentially-expanded UN Security Council. For other countries, it is money for cash-strapped government budgets (the UN reimburses the countries several times a poor soldier's salary), or a chance to appease the Bush administration without compromising on trade issues or opposition to the Iraq War.

But the realists should see that the winds in Latin America are changing. The Bush administration's global focus on military control, which is also embodied by MINUSTAH, is losing credibility and failing—and not just in Iraq. While President Chávez was basking in the crowds' energy in Port-au-Prince and other Latin American cities, President Bush met with national leaders in remote or heavily guarded locations to avoid the large protests held in every single country he visited.

In the last two months, citizens of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru have taken to the streets to protest their countries' complicity in MINUSTAH's brutality. The MINUSTAH countries may soon find that in pursuing George Bush's Haiti policy, they have tied their destiny to a sinking ship.

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