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Haiti Democracy Project

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The Haiti Democracy Project, located in Washington D.C., is an independent organization advocating a more effective U.S. policy toward Haiti. James R. Morrell is Executive Director of the Haiti Democracy Project where Alice Blanchet serves as Director of Development.

1. How have Haitians reacted to the allegations of corruption surrounding President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the Dominican Republic?

The allegations surrounding President Aristide and corruption regarding the Dominican Republic are an issue that is on everyone's mind. The sentiment felt among the Haitian population is that corruption is not only condoned but also promoted under this regime. Not only President Aristide, but also his wife has been implicated in being involved in corruption charges with the Dominican Republic concerning free-trade zones. The chairman of the Dominican bank Baninter, Ramón Baez Figueroa, has provided planes for trips with Aristide and President Mejía of the Dominican Republic. Furthermore, President Aristide has been also been accused of having ties to drug traffickers.

2. What is Washington's primary goal in its policy toward Haiti?

Washington's primary goal in its policy toward Haiti is — as it has been under past administrations — the stability of Haiti. This goal was demonstrated by the United States military involvement in 1994, providing troops to restore President Aristide back into power. The elusive quest has been to bring stability to not only Haiti, but to the region as a whole. Intertwined with bringing stability are issues concerning refugees and economic recovery. The two are related in that economic recovery would take pressure off of the refugees who are plagued by daily by the terrible economic situation of Haiti.

It can be said that Washington lacks an overall policy toward Haiti. Future policy needs to be more proactive rather than simply withholding funding that never reaches its intended areas. The government is capable of sustaining itself in the absence of foreign aid by engaging in illegal activities to sustain itself. The Haitian population is not able to support itself without foreign aid and therefore a more proactive approach is needed to bring about this end.

3. Haiti recently ranked last in the world in access to clean drinking water. The number of households with access to potable water is estimated at twenty percent. Health issues arising from unsanitary water are posing a major public health problem. What it to blame?

The factor most accounting for this problem is the absence of the rule of law. There is a lack of zoning laws and the ones that are in existence are not observed. The problem becomes more complicated when those in power want to take over land in order to bring in business and increase their profit. The government removes the people occupying those lands in order to carry out their personal investment projects with no regard for the health of the people.

Poor urbanization also contributes to this problem. The main sources of water have been polluted and no attempts to stop the contamination or to prevent people from settling in these areas have been made. Institutions have attempted to intervene in situations such as where severe erosion has occurred, but the government has not made any attempt to work with these groups. The government has been totally irresponsible, especially in the last ten years under the rule of Aristide.

4. What is the status of President Aristide's efforts to reconcile differences with the opposition party in the run-up to the elections?

There has been no attempt at reconciliation. President Aristide has only one interest and that is perpetuating himself in power. All other concerns are secondary.

He was restored to power under the pretenses that he would return democracy, order and constitutional rule but has since violated all aspects of the constitution in his effort to monopolize power. In retrospect, he has been worse than former Haitian leader Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier, who ruled from 1957 – 1971. Aristide has been attempting to move toward amending the constitution so that he can guarantee himself a third term. He is also attempting to enact an amendment that would allow dual citizenship so that his rule can be passed on to his Haitian-American wife.

No significant efforts have been made to reconcile with the opposition. Aristide has betrayed any credit he had or any faith placed in him. He has been a disappointment to Haitians who thought that he would be the one to bring about change.

5. More than \$500 million in aid was withheld from Haiti following the May 2000 elections. Was this suspension merited and how has this impacted the Haitian population?

The elections of May 2000 were conducted under the presence of an OAS observer and were characterized by much hard work from all of the poll workers. 60 percent of the electorate came out and voted in the elections, a significant achievement. The majority of those Haitians who came out for the elections voted for the Lavalas Party of Aristide, but many also voted for opposition parties. The Central Counting Office, under pressure from

Aristide, subsequently discarded votes for opposition parties into the streets to ensure that members of his own party would fill the government. This move was a step toward

perpetuating himself in power and amending the constitution to do so. This type of occurrence has been typical throughout Haitian history.

The United States provided \$100 million in aid over a 10–12 years period to help with Haitian elections. The Clinton Administration withheld aid with the promise that the elections would be corrected, but this promise was never fulfilled. Withholding funds is hardly characteristic of a coherent policy and provides evidence of the lack of an overall strategy. However, due to the lack of transparency, total corruption and the government's gross neglect of the population, the aid never would reach the Haitian people as it was intended.

6. Attorney General John Ashcroft's recent decree that Haitian asylum seekers will be detained without bond was issued with the understanding that the detentions will forestall a mass Haitian migration to the United States. He also charges that more and more citizens of third party nations are using Haiti as a staging point for migration to the United States. Is there any merit to his claims?

The issue of Haitians engaging in an effort toward mass migration to the United States is a false issue. The Department of Justice is unjustly discriminating against Haitian immigrants for the sole reasons that they are poor and black. There is an element of racism in this policy. Many Haitian immigrants have valid fears of political persecution and suffer the dreadful effects of the economic devastation that afflicts Haiti. Many refugees are justifiably fleeing an implausible situation.

The accusation that Haiti is being used as a staging point by citizens of third party nations for entry into the United States is a result of the post-September 11 mentality of U.S. foreign policy. These accusations stem from the concern of preventing terrorist activity and the overcompensation in its policies. The U.S. government has a legitimate concern about the current vacuum of power in Haiti, but the current number of Haitians seeking asylum in the U.S. is hardly reflective of an effort at mass migration. Those seeking asylum are genuine political refugees, attempting to leave justified threats of political persecution and economic hardship.

6. Haiti recently celebrated the 200th anniversary of its national flag. Will Haitians be amenable to Aristide's request that all Haitians unite behind him at this symbolic point in history?

The statement made by Aristide on the 200th anniversary of the national flag was very cynical. The symbolic occasion gave Aristide an occasion to wrap himself in the flag and give the appearance that he is legitimately concerned about the Haitian population and attempting to ameliorate their plight. His support has fallen from 65 percent at the time of the 2000 elections to between five and ten percent currently. This speech was a veiled attempt by Aristide to take advantage of the opportunity for his own personal gain, but the people of Haiti have come to see through his façade.

7. The IMF and Haiti last week inked a deal to free up millions of dollars in aid. To receive it, Haitian officials promised to cut government spending and stabilize its currency. What impacts will this initiative have on Haiti's economy?

In the desperate economic conditions of Haiti, the government will have a problem reconciling its policies. At the same time, the government will not be able to live up to its commitments of cutting spending and stabilizing the currency. The government will not be able to cut spending, especially in an election year where the government will have to increase spending in the form of political payoffs to ensure its monopoly on power. Aristide has spent large sums of money, in the range of \$2.5 million, to various American lobbyists. This type of spending on American lobbyists is extremely large for a small country like Haiti. The arrival of the 200th anniversary will also make it extremely difficult to live up to these promises.

8. France exacted 90 million francs from Haiti upon its independence in 1803. Aristide says that would amount to \$21.7 billion today, and has demanded that France repay it. France has denied this request. Will Haiti continue to fight for these funds?

Aristide's demand that France pay the 90 million francs it extracted from Haiti is just hyping for local politics because Aristide knows that the money cannot be recovered. The French government is in no position to take orders from a government characterized by a lack of transparency, corruption, and ties to drugs.

We at the Haiti Democracy Project would like to see Haiti get billions of dollars in aid that is needed to bring about free elections and to restart the economy. Haiti should get this aid, no matter where it comes from. However, there is nothing in place with this government to ensure that the aid will go where it is most needed. Agencies like the World Bank have pulled out of Haiti on account of the government's corruption. This is why a more proactive policy toward Haiti is needed – but no attempts have been forthcoming.