



Haiti Fades as Washington's Shadow Grows

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TORONTO, May 10 (IPS) - One of the little noticed outcomes of February's ouster of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide appears to be the concept of a Canadian foreign policy that differs from Washington's on major international issues, say critics of Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin.

As a rebel uprising swept south towards Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince in February, Canada joined the United States and France in side-stepping efforts by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) to broker a power-sharing deal that would have kept Aristide as president and allowed his democratically elected administration, the country's first, to maintain power until the next election.

Instead, civilian opposition groups rejected the proposal, and the former priest and champion of the poor was forced from Haiti on Feb. 29, under some form of pressure from Washington and Paris. The armed rebels -- linked to the disbanded Haitian army and past human rights violations -- seized power.

Canada accepts the U.S./French version of the events: that Aristide signed a letter of resignation Feb. 29 "to avoid bloodshed", Canadian official Patrick Riel told IPS.

Although Ottawa "shares" CARICOM's concerns about Haiti -- the grouping has still not decided if it will recognise the interim government in Port-au-Prince -- Ottawa does not support its call for a probe into Aristide's claim he was "kidnapped" and secreted to the Central African Republic, adds Riel of the department of foreign affairs and international trade.

"We said we had no information that indicates that there should be support for this investigation."

Past Canadian governments might have questioned the exiling of a democratically chosen president and the international legal implications of that act, say critics of Martin, who came to office last December.

What seems different now is that the new administration is keen to develop closer security and military ties with the neighbouring United States to ensure minimal disruption of trade across the nations' common border under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Alexa McDonough, foreign affairs critic for the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) says she has noticed a "me-too" attitude in the Martin administration in relation to the policies of U.S. President George W Bush. "I think how quickly Canada rushed into Haiti, without thinking it through," she says in an interview.

McDonough says, for example, that troops of the U.S.-led multinational force that will be replaced by U.N. peacekeepers Jun. 1, "have no real game plan" to disarm armed gangs and other criminals in Haiti.

On Monday, the Haiti Support Group said that "armed irregulars", including former rebels and soldiers, continued to rule in many parts of the country, taking over both police and government offices by force.

Government officials have also issued a formal call for former soldiers to report to authorities with an aim to incorporate them into a revamped police force, the group added in a statement from London.

McDonough says Martin's naming of David Pratt as his defence minister helped set the pace for a pro-U.S. Canadian foreign policy.

While the new prime minister publicly supports the decision made one year ago by his predecessor, former Prime Minister Jean Chretien, to keep Canada out of the U.S.-led war on Iraq, Pratt is a former chair of parliament's defence committee who lost the battle within the Liberal Party to send Canadian soldiers to participate in the toppling of the regime of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

With Martin and Pratt in their present jobs, a former Canadian diplomat who wishes to remain anonymous doubts that Ottawa will stake out foreign policy stands that are substantially different from Washington's, particularly after snubbing Bush's "coalition of the willing" as it invaded Iraq.

That explains Martin's Haiti policy, he suggests. "I don't think anybody (in Ottawa) said we were hugely happy about that decision" -- Aristide's removal, the ex-diplomat told IPS. "I guess if you are Canada, you don't want to rub a whole lot more salt in the (U.S.'s) wounds. So in other areas, you are inclined to be a little more co-operative."

Washington-based analyst Larry Birns, who followed closely CARICOM's mediation efforts in Haiti, argues that the Government of Jamaica demonstrated more backbone in opposing Washington's Haiti policy than Martin's government, which was "simply sitting in the closet, afraid to come out."

"Here you have a country like Jamaica with a troubled economy, totally dependent upon U.S. goodwill for affirmative votes in the lending agencies and for bilateral treatment, daring to challenge the U.S. on its Haiti policy, on the treatment of Aristide," says Birns, director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs.

Birns says ambassadors of CARICOM nations he spoke to in Washington were considerably disappointed with the passive approach of "big brother" Canada to the Haiti crisis. (IPS was unable to get a comment from the Jamaican consulate general in Toronto on Caribbean reaction to Canada's Haiti policy.)

Although Canada has strong economic, political and cultural ties with both the English and French speaking islands in the Caribbean, Ottawa has in recent months demonstrated "a decline of interest in the region," says Birns.

"What Haiti needed at that time (during CARICOM's mediation efforts) was the Canadians to come forth to say, 'we are prepared to send in (a maximum of 1,000 soldier) in order to preserve the democratic process in Haiti and not let mob violence rid that country, produce an extra-constitutional denouement to the problem'."

Carlo Dade, an Ottawa-based political expert on Haiti suggests it would not take more than a few thousand peacekeeping soldiers to disarm thuggish elements in Haiti.

It was the failure of Canadian and U.S. officials to complete their training and recruitment for the Haitian police in the early 1990s (following Aristide's U.S.-brokered return after a coup) that helped to create the conditions of lawlessness today in the impoverished country, adds Dade, a

senior advisor for the Canadian Foundation for the Americas.

The U.N. Security Council has approved a two-year peacekeeping force for Haiti, to include 6,700 soldiers and 1,622 civilian police officers.

"Does this add up to a long term commitment?" Dade asks. The jury is out, he responds, until all of the humanitarian aid promised by international donors arrives and disarmament has occurred, which will then allow aid personnel to enter Haiti safely.

But he adds that U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan originally discussed keeping peacekeepers in the troubled nation "for 10 years."

The prospect of the world forgetting about Haiti until the next crisis arises and another international military intervention is needed is on the mind of Franz Voltaire, director of the Haitian, Caribbean and Afro-Canadian International Documentation and Information Centre, in Montreal.

One of more than 100,000 people of Haitian origin living in Canada, the majority in French-speaking Quebec, Voltaire urges Canada to take the lead "pushing the other countries" to rebuild the political and economic infrastructure in Haiti, including the police and justice system.

Unfortunately, adds Voltaire, "you can't expect much action until after the national election this year in Canada and the U.S."

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