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Blood on the Hands of Canadian Imperialists in Haiti

By Roger Annis

(Editors' Note September 3, 2004) *Our article on Canadian imperialism in Haiti (below) was reprinted in three Canadian and U.S. publications. Anthony Fenton, Canada's leading writer on Haitian solidarity, tells Socialist Voice that SV 11 "is getting some good circulation in Haiti solidarity circles (and 'rightist' ones too)."*

"In response to the August 6th broadcast of CBC's 'The Current,' apparently DFAIT [Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade] was bombarded with calls about the secret meeting Paradis hosted in January of 2003," he continues. "Just today I got an e-mail from DFAIT denying several things while maintaining their refusal to discuss the human rights abuses.

"But I think that they are feeling some heat, especially after the head of Canadian Forces in Haiti admitted that at least 1,000 bodies were buried in a mass grave ... during a well-attended media teleconference call, July 29, the same one you mention in your article. Somehow the Toronto Star writer neglected to mention this and other facts that were revealed on the call. I've just gotten word that repression has again reached levels resembling the immediate post-coup period. Bodies are piling up fast in the morgue once again, after violence had subsided somewhat."

Five hundred Canadian soldiers are returning from Haiti this month. Together with the armed forces of France and the United States, they took part in the violent overthrow of the elected government of Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide in February/March of this year. Since then, occupying troops have provided backing for rightist gangs who will form the core of the police and government authority the occupying forces are cobbling together to replace the Aristide government.

Troops from the three countries began occupying Haiti on February 29, hours after the United Nations Security Council gave its blessing. Aristide was kidnapped by U.S. forces later that day and flown out of the country. He now lives in asylum.

The capitalist media in Canada presented the coup as a popular uprising against an unpopular regime. Since then, they have kept a discreet silence about conditions in Haiti under imperialist occupation. New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton spoke not a word about the ongoing

tragedy in Haiti during the federal election campaign in May and June. Trade union leaders have also kept mum.

The truth urgently needs to be told about Ottawa's crime against the Haitian people.

A disaster for the Haitian people

Constitutional government in Haiti, won through many years of tenacious struggle, has been overthrown. Killings by rightist gangs were widespread leading up to the coup and they have continued during the occupation regime. Several thousand have died. The rightists target supporters of the Aristide government and anyone striving to improve social conditions in the country. Rightists convicted of crimes and human rights violations during previous regimes have been released from prison and are involved in the killings.

U.S. troops have taken part in the attacks on the Haitian people. An Associated Press reporter witnessed U.S. marines joining police in firing on a demonstration of tens of thousands of Haitians on May 18 in Port au Prince. A dozen people were killed and many more injured. Demonstrators were demanding the return of Aristide on the occasion of a holiday marking Haitian independence.

Following the coup, living conditions in Haiti have gone from bad to worse. Prices for basic foodstuffs have risen sharply, the minimum wage has been cut by the new governing authority, and civic services have declined. Flooding this past May in the eastern part of the island devastated many villages and killed several thousand. In the countryside, drought conditions are hitting the livelihood of farmers and threatening the vital food harvest. Precious little international aid is being delivered to meet emergency needs.

In a letter to the *Toronto Star* on July 30, a reader described her dismay with the head of the Canadian military in Haiti when he described the occupation as a "success." The letter recounted a recent telephone conversation with a Canadian aid worker living in Cap Haitien, the second largest city in Haiti. "Things are so much worse than they were last October, prior to the revolt in February," reported the worker. "Supporters of Jean-Bertrand Aristide are still being hunted down by those who support a new regime.... Food supplies are low, electricity is only on for one to three hours daily, garbage is piled up along the roads, as there has been no collection for many months now, and people everywhere are sick."

Why imperialism opposed Aristide

Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas. Average annual income is a few hundred dollars. Average life expectancy is 49 years for men and 50 for women. An AIDS epidemic is ravaging the country. Forty seven percent of the adult population is illiterate and unemployment is 60% to 70%. The country is burdened by a crushing debt to imperialist governments and lending agencies. Gross domestic product in Haiti has declined from US\$4 billion in 1999 to \$2.9 billion in 2003.

Aristide rose to prominence in the 1980s during the revolutionary movement that overthrew the Duvalier dictatorship in 1990. He was first elected president that year with the overwhelming

support of Haiti's working people on a platform of radical social reform. Nine months later he was overthrown by a military coup. He was elected again in May of 2000.

The masses in Haiti had big expectations in the governments headed by Aristide, and despite many disappointments with his performance, they continued to place enormous pressure on his government to stand up to the imperialists and improve their lot. Aristide established diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1996, and he welcomed hundreds of Cuban doctors and health workers to provide health care in remote parts of the country. The post-2000 government built new schools and refused imperialist demands to privatize state-owned services such as electricity, telephones, and ports.

Aristide angered the French government in April 2003 when he demanded that it pay \$21 billion in reparation to Haiti. France, the former colonial power, had extorted millions of dollars in payments from Haitian governments during the 19th and 20th centuries as punishment for the successful anti-slave revolt that led to Haiti's independence from France in 1804.

Aristide's governments brought few improvements in living conditions for the masses. It implemented measures demanded by the imperialists, including lowering of tariffs that protected local food production, emptying of the national treasury in order to pay off international lending institutions, and privatizing some state-owned industries. Nevertheless, the imperialist powers feared a revival of the mass movement that had toppled the Duvalier dictatorship, and they were not confident that Aristide would keep the island safe for continued exploitation.

Canadian imperialists in Haiti

The imperialist intervention in Haiti was a joint venture with rightist forces that launched an armed rebellion in early February. The rightists were armed and financed by wealthy Haitians and their backers in the U.S., France, Canada, and neighboring Dominican Republic. They were few in number and weak in the capital city Port au Prince. But pro-government defense forces were poorly organized and armed, and were politically disoriented by the record of the Aristide government in bowing to imperialist dictates.

In January 2003, Canada's foreign affairs department was one of the sponsors of an international conference in Ottawa that discussed and laid plans for the overthrow of Aristide's government. Thirteen months later, according to a report on the French-language television news network of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the elite service of the Canadian armed forces was among the imperialist troops that helped capture and secure the airport in Port au Prince in the early hours of February 29.

On July 6, Prime Minister Paul Martin announced that Canada would send 100 RCMP to replace the returning soldiers. Police and soldiers from the U.S., France, Chile, Brazil, and other countries will remain in Haiti, under UN Security Council approval. A press release from the Canadian government described the role of the occupation as, "to assist the transitional Haitian government in establishing a secure and stable environment, restoring law and order, and reforming the Haitian National Police."

Canada's troops provide security for the post-coup regime, and the killings continue. One of the tasks the occupation forces have set for themselves is to disarm the civilian population.

The Canadian government has convinced many at home and abroad that it is a friend of peace and democracy and that its armed forces abroad are "peacekeepers." This is a lie. Indignation against the crimes of Washington in Iraq and elsewhere will ring hollow if not accompanied by equal indignation at Ottawa's participation in the pillage and oppression of the semi-colonial world.

Those concerned with human rights, poverty and the oppression of the Third World peoples have a responsibility to speak out about the situation in Haiti. We should demand of the Canadian government that it withdraw police and military forces from that country and halt any form of assistance to the post-coup authority. Working-class and progressive organizations in Canada need to support the people of Haiti in opposing the coup-imposed regime and fighting for the return of the democratically elected government.

Among the sources used for this article are human rights reports in April, 2004 by the National Lawyers Guild in the U.S, a report in June of the U.S.-based Haiti Accompaniment Project, and a July report by the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti; articles in the socialist weekly newspaper The Militant; and reports by Canadian journalist Anthony Fenton.