

The hate and the quake

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The University of the West Indies is in the process of conceiving how best to deliver a major conference on the theme Rethinking And Rebuilding Haiti. I am very keen to provide an input into this exercise because for too long there has been a popular perception that somehow the Haitian nation-building project, launched on January 1, 1804, has failed on account of mismanagement, ineptitude, corruption.

Buried beneath the rubble of imperial propaganda, out of both Western Europe and the United States, is the evidence which shows that Haiti's independence was defeated by an aggressive North-Atlantic alliance that could not imagine their world inhabited by a free regime of Africans as representatives of the newly emerging democracy.

The evidence is striking, especially in the context of France..

The Haitians fought for their freedom and won, as did the Americans fifty years earlier. The Americans declared their independence and crafted an extraordinary constitution that set out a clear message about the value of humanity and the right to freedom, justice, and liberty.

In the midst of this brilliant discourse, they chose to retain slavery as the basis of the new nation state. The founding fathers therefore could not see beyond race, as the free state was built on a slavery foundation.

The water was poisoned in the well; the Americans went back to the battlefield a century later to resolve the fact that slavery and freedom could not comfortably co-exist in the same place.

The French, also, declared freedom, fraternity and equality as the new philosophies of their national transformation and gave the modern world a tremendous progressive boost by so doing.

They abolished slavery, but Napoleon Bonaparte could not imagine the republic without slavery and targeted the Haitians for a new, more intense regime of slavery. The British agreed, as did the Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese. All were linked in communion over the 500 000 Blacks in Haiti, the most populous and prosperous Caribbean colony. As the jewel of the Caribbean, they all wanted to get their hands on it. With a massive slave base, the English, French and Dutch salivated over owning it - and the

people.

The people won a ten-year war, the bloodiest in modern history, and declared their independence. Every other country in the Americas was based on slavery. Haiti was freedom, and proceeded to place in its 1805 Independence Constitution that any person of African descent who arrived on its shores would be declared free, and a citizen of the republic.

For the first time since slavery had commenced, Blacks were the subjects of mass freedom and citizenship in a nation.

The French refused to recognize Haiti's independence and declared it an illegal pariah state. The Americans, whom the Haitians looked to in solidarity as their mentor in independence, refused to recognize them, and offered solidarity instead to the French. The British, who were negotiating with the French to obtain the ownership title to Haiti, also moved in solidarity, as did every other nation-state the Western world.

Haiti was isolated at birth - ostracized and denied access to world trade, finance, and institutional development. It was the most vicious example of national strangulation recorded in modern history.

The Cubans, at least, have had Russia, China, and Vietnam. The Haitians were alone from inception. The crumbling began.

Then came 1825; the moment of full truth. The republic is celebrating its 21st anniversary. There is national euphoria in the streets of Port-au-Prince.

The economy is bankrupt; the political leadership isolated. The cabinet took the decision that the state of affairs could not continue.

The country had to find a way to be inserted back into the world economy. The French government was invited to a summit.

Officials arrived and told the Haitian government that they were willing to recognize the country as a sovereign nation but it would have to pay compensation and reparation in exchange. The Haitians, with backs to the wall, agreed to pay the French.

The French government sent a team of accountants and actuaries into Haiti in order to place a value on all lands, all physical assets, the 500 000 citizens were who formerly enslaved, animals, and all other commercial properties and services.

The sums amounted to 150 million gold francs. Haiti was told to pay this reparation to France in return for national recognition.

The Haitian government agreed; payments began immediately. Members of the Cabinet were also valued because they had been enslaved people before independence.

Thus began the systematic destruction of the Republic of Haiti. The French government bled the nation and rendered it a failed state. It was a merciless exploitation that was designed and guaranteed to collapse the Haitian economy and society.

Haiti was forced to pay this sum until 1922 when the last installment was made. During the long 19th century, the payment to France amounted to up to 70 per cent of the country's foreign exchange earnings.

Jamaica today pays up to 70 per cent in order to service its international and domestic debt. Haiti was crushed by this debt payment. It descended into financial and social chaos.

The republic did not stand a chance. France was enriched and it took pleasure from the fact that having been defeated by Haitians on the battlefield, it had won on the field of finance. In the years when the coffee crops failed, or the sugar yield was down, the Haitian government borrowed on the French money market at double the going interest rate in order to repay the French government.

When the Americans invaded the country in the early 20th century, one of the reasons offered was to assist the French in collecting its reparations.

The collapse of the Haitian nation resides at the feet of France and America, especially. These two nations betrayed, failed, and destroyed the dream that was Haiti; crushed to dust in an effort to destroy the flower of freedom and the seed of justice.

Haiti did not fail. It was destroyed by two of the most powerful nations on earth, both of which continue to have a primary interest in its current condition.

The sudden quake has come in the aftermath of summers of hate. In many ways the quake has been less destructive than the hate.

Human life was snuffed out by the quake, while the hate has been a long and inhumane suffocation - a crime against humanity.

During the 2001 UN Conference on Race in Durban, South Africa, strong representation was made to the French government to repay the 150 million francs. The value of this amount was estimated by financial actuaries as US\$21 billion. This sum of capital could rebuild Haiti and place it in a position to re-engage the modern world. It was illegally extracted from the Haitian people and should be repaid.

It is stolen wealth. In so doing, France could discharge its moral obligation to the Haitian people.

For a nation that prides itself in the celebration of modern diplomacy, France, in order to exist with the moral authority of this diplomacy in this post-modern world, should do the just and legal thing.

Such an act at the outset of this century would open the door for a sophisticated interface of past and present, and set the Haitian nation free at last.