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Signs of the Times in Haiti The Military, Money, and the Meaning of an Occupation By Dr. Nia Imara, PhD BC Guest Commentator

There are periods in a country's history when the signs and warnings that that history will soon enter into a dramatically different phase are clear as day. Such is the period today in Haiti, where daily events portend an inauspicious development for the future: the Haitian Army may soon be returning.

For the past several months, paramilitary groups consisting of former military men, former death squad members, and new recruits have been planting themselves throughout Haiti. They are armed, they have new uniforms, and they are loudly demanding that Michel Martelly make good on his presidential campaign promise to formally bring back the army, which former President Aristide disbanded back in 1995 to near universal support. This past April, one of these groups of hopeful soldiers stormed Haiti's parliament to voice their demands and their support for Prime Minister designate Laurent Lamothe. It is estimated that as many as 3,500 men and women are currently training in impromptu military bases across the country.

President Martelly, who was elected by only a small minority of the populace in March 2011, has publically denounced the armed men and asked them to disband.[\[1\]](#) But it strains the imagination to think that he is truly ingenuous, and anyone who honestly assesses his record would be hard pressed to assert that he is genuinely displeased with the activity of the renegade paramilitary. To the contrary, the reformation of the Haitian Army is in perfect alignment with his plans for Haiti's future. Last year, Martelly announced a \$95 million plan to form a new army.[\[2\]](#) To begin, the plan calls for the employment of

3,500 soldiers, as well as a National Intelligence Service (SIN is the French acronym) that would be authorized to handle people accused of "terrorism".

Yet the return of the army is far from what the majority of Haitians have expressed that they want for their country, which is still suffering from the January 2010 earthquake, from cholera introduced by the United Nations (UN), and from more than eight years of a debilitating military occupation by the UN, the United States, France, and Canada, with Brazil having nominal command of the UN troops.

Martelly's entry into office gave the green light to the unofficial military, known as the Pink Militia in Haiti, which has since been actively organizing itself and even claiming authority over the law in some neighborhoods. This past year especially, a climate of fear and repression has descended, especially upon those who are active in Haiti's most popular political organization, called Lavalas. Reports from Haiti indicate that pro-democracy grassroots activists are under attack by elements that are both officially and unofficially affiliated with Martelly and who would also like to see the return of the army. Due to the repression, intimidation, and threats to their lives, some activists have gone into hiding. Many in Haiti who are old enough to remember compare the period today with the Duvalier dictatorship, which used the army as an instrument of repression against the poor majority.

Martelly's administration and the UN have permitted these paramilitary groups to act with near-impunity.^[3] This should come as no surprise, however, since Martelly—a loyal supporter of the Duvalier regime who gained the eager support of the US State Department—has been unwavering in his promise to bring back the army, and because for the past eight years the UN has consistently sided with the forces that made the coup against the democratically elected Lavalas government in 2004. Each of these parties—the army, the Martelly administration, the US government, and the UN—have a common vision for the future of Haiti. In order for this future to be realized, it is necessary for the army to be reborn.

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Since Haiti is often portrayed as a hopelessly impoverished nation with a history of political corruption and instability, why the United States is so interested in Haiti might seem inconceivable. "Why Haiti?" one is led to ask. Though the answer may be difficult to accept, the facts are incontrovertible: the United States provided the Duvalier dictatorship and its death squads with tens of millions of dollars; the US helped to fund and train the Haitian-born paramilitary that provided the cover to

bring down Aristide's democratic Lavalas government in 2004; US organizations including USAID and the International Republican Institute have generously supplied anti-Lavalas groups with resources and sponsored anti-Aristide campaigns in the media; the US government aided and abetted the kidnapping and forced exile of Aristide from Haiti....But what conclusions should we draw from all this? Why Haiti? What's in it for the US?

Underlying the question "Why Haiti?" is the notion that Haiti, a small, desperately impoverished country of ten million souls, has little to offer such a powerful nation as the United States. It is not commonly known, however, that there is a vast amount of money to be made in Haiti. Anyone who has lived in poverty knows how incredibly costly it is to be poor. The reverse side of this coin: How enormously lucrative poverty can be.

The answer to the question "Why Haiti?" has been accurately summarized by Haitians who have witnessed the powerful, wealthy elite of this world tear apart their country since the 2004 coup. Five or six years ago, in the early days of the occupation, many Haitians explained that the US sponsored the coup so that it could pave the way for its *neoliberal agenda* in Haiti, so that it could *privatize* Haiti. In order to do this, it was imperative that the Lavalas movement—the chief obstacle to this goal—be destabilized and repressed. This is precisely what has taken place in Haiti for the past eight years, and in recent years, it is clear that these efforts have borne much fruit. Here are a few examples:

Promptly after Aristide was forced into exile in 2004, the United States Congress began to deliberate on the HOPE Act, which provided for the duty-free export to the US of products manufactured in Haiti. It was passed in 2006.

In 2007, President René Préal announced that the state-owned telephone company Teleco would be privatized. In a deal brokered by the World Bank, the plans were consummated in April 2010, and the company now belongs primarily to Viettel, a subsidiary of the Vietnamese Army.

In 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton brokered a deal for the South Korean clothing company Sae-A Co. Ltd. to open up shop in Haiti. US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks show that the US government worked with US clothing manufacturers to oppose a minimum wage increase for Haitian assembly line workers.[\[4\]](#)

The Inter-American Development Bank, Sae-A Co., and the US government are presently constructing the Caracol Industrial Park in

northern Haiti. Ground was broken last November, and the US has thus far committed \$124 million to the project.

In December 2011, the Dutch company Heineken announced its plans to increase its shareholding in the leading Haitian brewer from 22.5% to 95%.[\[5\]](#)

After the 2010 earthquake, the Canadian firm Majescor Resources acquired all of the shares of a Haitian firm in order to begin searching for gold, copper, and other minerals. Within the past couple of years, US and other multinational investors—including Newmont Mining Corp., Eurasian Minerals Inc., and VCS Mining—have also acquired permits and spent millions of dollars for exploratory drilling campaigns for minerals in northern Haiti.[\[6\]](#) [\[7\]](#)

Thus, the gold rush on occupied Haiti is both literal and figurative. But Haitians have long been aware of their human and material wealth. For instance, the platform of Fanmi Lavalas, Aristide's political party, for his second term in office, included detailed accounts and plans for the gold and other mineral resources that have recently been "discovered" in Haiti.[\[8\]](#) The foreign companies and corporations that want to exploit Haiti invariably claim that their investments will create more opportunities for the people and that they will facilitate Haiti's sovereignty. History, however, tells a different story.

For nearly a century, going back at least as far as the US military occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934—US and international business interests have made duplicitous investments in Haiti that proved to be to the overwhelming disadvantage of the majority. Then, as during the Duvalier dictatorship of 1957 to 1986, these interests exploited repressive conditions to execute profitable business deals with undemocratic regimes in the service of the Haitian and foreign elite. The case of rice is an infamous example. In the 1980s, in compliance with international lending agencies—and while the country was still reeling from Duvalierism—Haiti lifted tariffs from rice imports, after which the US—where the rice industry was subsidized—promptly flooded the market with cheaper rice. Haitian farmers could not compete, and the price of rice steadily rose once Haiti's dependence on the US for this staple was consolidated. This policy destroyed Haitian rice farming and severely crippled the country's ability to be self-sufficient agriculturally. In 2010, former President Clinton, whose home state of Arkansas was one of the largest beneficiaries of this policy, publicly apologized for his role in this situation, which led to increased urbanization and an increasing dependence on sweatshop labor to fuel Haiti's economy.

In his book, *Eyes of the Heart: Seeking a Path for the Poor in the Age of Globalization*, Aristide describes this and other salient examples of how foreign investors' conditional investment in and privatization of Haiti have adversely impacted the society. He also provides solutions and a vision of the future for Haiti, which are simply reflections of the hopes and strivings of most Haitians, who elected him president by an overwhelming majority in 2000. During his first term in office in 1995, with overwhelming popular support, he disbanded the military, which had consumed 40 percent of the national budget. Today, the people have consistently expressed their desire for free and widespread access to education, employment, housing, an inclusive and democratic government, and an end to the UN/US occupation—not for an army.

The right thing for the United States government to do is to break with its odious foreign policy of supporting dictatorships in Haiti as well as its abhorrent treatment of the Haitian people. At the very least, it should withdraw its support of Michel Martelly and the occupation and to stop trying to control Haiti's future, by economic or any other means.

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[1] Martelly was selected by less than 17% of the electorate. Funded in part by the US government, the fraudulent elections that brought him to power violated a number of Haitian laws—for instance, the most popular political party, Lavalas, was banned from participating—and were widely boycotted. See “The Emperor Has No Votes” by Charlie Hinton. <http://www.haitisolidarity.net/article.php?id=522>. By comparison, in the 2000 elections, the voter turnout was at least 65%, and Aristide was reelected to a second presidency with 92% of the vote.

[2] “Haitians Train for a Future With a Military.” <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/26/world/americas/president-michel-martelly-seeks-to-re-create-haitis-army.html?pagewanted=all>

[3] Time will tell how effectively the UN follow through with its very recent “crack downs” on the illicit army. “UN crack down armed men pushing to restoration of army.” http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/haiti-police-un-crack-down-armed-men-pushing-to-restoration-of-army/2012/05/07/gIQAmgg87T_story.html

[4] "WikiLeaks Haiti: Let Them Live on \$3 a Day."

<http://www.thenation.com/article/161057/wikileaks-haiti-let-them-live-3-day>

[5] "HEINEKEN to increase shareholding in leading Haitian brewer."

http://www.heinekeninternational.com/131211_heineken+to+increase+shareholding+in+le.aspx

[6] "Shock waves — Majescor flourishes in post-quake Haiti."

<http://business.financialpost.com/2012/05/01/shock-waves-majescor-flourishes-in-post-quake-haiti/>

[7] "Eurasian Minerals Provides an Update on Haiti Exploration Programs."

<http://www.marketwatch.com/story/eurasian-minerals-provides-an-update-on-haiti-exploration-programs-2012-04-23-1028140>

[8] "Investir dans l'Humain, Livre Blanc de Fanmi Lavalas, Sous la Direction de Jean-Bertrand Aristide." Published by Imprimerie Henri Deschamps, Haiti. 1999.



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