

## **Haiti needs democracy, not dictatorship**

*Why won't you acknowledge the obvious?*

Haiti is at another crossroads in its tortured history, a pivotal one where our people finally have a chance at true democracy. The Aristide government that rode to power on the hopes of so many people has forfeited its right to rule with its increasingly anti-democratic posture. Instead of a brighter future, we are sliding into darker times. Instead of hope, Aristide has given us hate; instead of democracy, he has given us desperation. It is time for a change.

One year ago, Haitians from many different backgrounds got together to help find a solution to our country's increasingly difficult crisis. In January 2003, we formally organized under the name "Group 184." The name is a reflection of the number of groups, organisations and institutions within the coalition. Our purpose is to help create the atmosphere where all people can have a say in their government without fear of persecution. It is a basic right Americans take for granted, but one long denied to Haitians.

Toward this end, we presented a proposal for a Social Contract that outlined different points that offer a new way to live together in harmony, regardless of the difference of opinions. Unfortunately, this was seen as a threat by Mr. Aristide, his Government and his gun-toting henchmen in the streets. He rejected all compromise that would allow him to work hand in hand with the civil society. The campaign to intimidate and terrorize the population took another dimension.

For the past eight weeks we have seen people from all affiliations, economic and social background pull together in a unanimous voice and march as one in protests denouncing the corruption and human rights abuse that characterize President Jean Bertrand Aristide's way of governing the country. Instead of leaving up to the image he was able to project at the beginning of his political career, he chose, through his words and his actions, to bring his country to a level of torment and poverty never reached before. And now, the Haitian people are saying "no more!"

Mr. Aristide's government tries to blind the public's opinion into believing that it is only a small minority that wants him to leave, or face trial in a court of law for his crimes. Fortunately, pictures and videos don't lie. The proof is there. In spite of the beatings, the killings, the arbitrary arrests and the threats, the Haitian people are determined to be rid of this retrograde in a peaceful way, with only one weapon, THEIR VOICE! One should ask why Mr. Aristide is afraid to allow peaceful gatherings and expression of opinions. Why?

Yes, many Haitians are afraid to voice their opinion, fearing persecution, but more and more they have become aware that they will remain forever at the mercy of terrorists disguised as lawmakers or heads of States, if they do not take an interest in the political

1/2

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affairs of their country and denounce what is by all means unacceptable. Such an awakening takes time for a population kept quiet by oppression. But it is finally happening. And there is no turning back.

President Aristide is determined to celebrate grandly the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Haiti's independence in the city of Gonaives, where the declaration of independence was first read in 1804. To do so he has to stop by all means an uprising started since the end of September demanding his departure. Since this uprising people have been arrested, killed and beaten for no other reason than expressing their basic human right of peaceful protest. The inhabitants of Gonaives have been living in a constant state of terror for the past months, and yet they still say: "you will have to kill us all first". So far 52 people are known to have been killed in this city and others have disappeared in the government's efforts to ensure that Gonaives is subdued so that Aristide can deliver his speech. He wants to believe that he can commemorate the greatest battle for liberty by imposing his tyranny. How ironic? The very Haitians that he is supposed to serve and protect are saying "No".

There are countless testimonies and proofs of the abuse and the oppression. Countless. Yet, President Bush and the American press are ignoring them. Why? It couldn't be ignorance; the reality is in their face, day in and day out. Could it be that it's too difficult to acknowledge that they have been fooled by a madman posing as the savior of Haiti? Well, for the sake of those very courageous men and women who are trying very hard with a peaceful approach to have a chance at a decent life with no fear of reprisal for taking a stand, it is time to let the truth be known. After all it is only the truth isn't it? So how hard is it to be humble enough and acknowledge it?

In the past, the Haitians have been portrayed by the American press as people with barbaric and violent practices when it comes to solving their problems. Now that they have chosen the path of peace, dedication, and progress to end their misery, it is not exposed to the world. Do you need more bloodshed to pay attention?

What is happening in Haiti right now will not go away. The repression and the physical pain being inflicted by Aristide will not stop. On the other hand, the will of the Haitian people will not deviate from what it is now : President Aristide has to leave or stays to be judged for his crimes against his own people.

The people who are trying desperately to rescue the country from this dictator are citizens from all social classes, family men and women with no guns, no weapons and no thugs or police to protect them. But they want to be heard and they want a chance for a better Haiti. After all, 200 years is a long time to wait.

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