



## Haiti in Extremis: The Poorest Country in the Western Hemisphere Has Bigger Problems than Poverty

By Nicholas Eberstadt

*It is without question that Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, plagued by disease and poverty and riddled with gang violence. Without a real provision of the fundamental human rights of safety and security for its citizens, this position is likely to hold well into the future, and until the impoverished nation can begin to look beyond its past to its culture of survival, Haiti will be unable to achieve the modernity its people deserve.*

A brief summer visit to Haiti—the beautiful, perpetually tormented tropical purgatory that occupies the western third of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola—cannot help but focus the comfortable and well-fed foreign visitor's attention on two profound issues of the modern era: the reasons for the persistence of so much misery in an ever more affluent world, and the practical measures that might permit our world's poorest countries to escape from the heart-rending deprivation that they continue to suffer.

With an area comparable to the state of Maryland and a population (at about 8.5 million) roughly the size of New York City's, Haiti is closer to Florida—just an hour and a half from Miami by jet—than is Washington, D.C. But in a very real sense, the distance between the United States and Haiti is almost unimaginable.

### **Clinging to Life**

By the yardstick of income, Haiti is by far the poorest spot in the Western Hemisphere, and in

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fact one of the poorest places on the planet. State Department and CIA guesses put the country's per-capita income at about \$550 a year, or about a dollar and a half per day—but these formal, exchange-rate based estimates are highly misleading, if not meaningless. (Could anyone in the United States today survive for a year consuming no more than \$1.50 worth of goods and services a day?) A better sense of Haiti's plight comes from comparisons of purchasing power. Perhaps the most authoritative global estimates of this sort have been done by eminent economic historian Angus Maddison. At the start of this decade, according to Maddison, Haiti's per-capita output was thirty-five times lower than that of the United States. To get a sense of what this means, think how things would go for your family if you had to get by for the entire year on just ten days of your current earnings.

Haiti looks impoverished even when compared to other impoverished countries. By Maddison's reckoning, per-capita purchasing power in Haiti is one-third that of Bolivia, the poorest country in South America. There is no country in the Middle East or Asia with an income level as low as Haiti's—not even Bangladesh. And although

sub-Saharan Africa is the epicenter of desperate poverty in the modern world, a majority of sub-Saharan countries enjoy per-capita income levels that are higher than Haiti's.

Income numbers alone, however, cannot convey an accurate impression of the terrible deprivation that is the inescapable lot of the ordinary Haitian. For this, one must take a stroll through La Saline, or Bel Air, or any of the other wretched slums that account for most of the living quarters in Haiti's capital, the sprawling city of Port-au-Prince.

From high up in the hills that ring this city by the bay, the place looks sublime: on the horizon a perfect blue sky meets a shimmering sea to frame the vast metropolis below. The illusion is maintained only so long as one is sufficiently removed to view actual human beings. As one makes the descent into town, the picture quickly changes: the eye of Bierstadt is replaced by the eye of Bruegel, and then by the eye of Bosch. Once in the city proper, one realizes that the urban sky is so clear because Haiti is too poor to have air pollution. Gasoline and diesel vehicles are out of almost everyone's reach, and garbage is too precious to be burned on the street. But Port-au-Prince is not too poor to have sewage: that humid choking stench is everywhere. Unending makeshift shacks stretch from clogged "canals," through which water the color of petroleum slowly trickles: this is at once the communal latrine and the water supply for washing the evening's cookware.

Tiny storefronts stocked with a few handfuls of merchandise advertise their wares with homemade signs in French or Creole (the Africanized French fusion most Haitians actually speak), but many—perhaps most—of the thronging passersby cannot understand these because they have never learned to read. Children are everywhere, many of them painfully thin: some are clothed, some partially clothed, others not clothed at all. Not a few bear the marks of illness, infections, or growths that have never been diagnosed or treated. The graying decayed remnants of a few kites entangled on telephone lines provide the only hint that any of these children has ever possessed or enjoyed a toy. As for the grown-ups on the street, some seem agitated and others enervated, but almost all are shrunken and weathered, aged far beyond

their years. Young women here look middle-aged, and middle-aged men positively ancient. And these are the adults strong enough and healthy enough to be out on the streets. The victims of Haiti's chronic epidemic afflictions—malaria, tuberculosis, and (now) HIV/AIDS—are more likely to be out of sight, in the hovels of the back alleyways, resting and trying to cling to life.

## A Hobbesian Nightmare

Yet things are even worse—much worse—for most Haitians than this bleak street picture might suggest.

There is an important qualitative difference between grinding poverty and utter misery, and Haiti today lies on the wrong side of that divide. These impoverished Haitians lack more than money, food, medicine, schooling, decent housing, shoes, clean water, and regular electricity. They also lack personal safety and physical security. Haiti is a territory trapped between a state of siege and a state of nature—a Hobbesian nightmare in which violent and well-armed crime gangs operate essentially at will, effectively controlling much of the area in which ordinary people have to live.

The personnel of most foreign embassies simply will not visit many inhabited regions of the country without armed escorts, and are specifically enjoined from visiting other places (such as the Cité Soleil slum, home to perhaps half a million people) under any circumstances. During the third day of my Haiti visit, word went around that a man had been not just murdered, but deliberately beheaded on the same street as the U.S. ambassador's residence—an effective message to the island that absolutely no spot in Haiti is beyond the reach of the crimelords.

The more well-to-do Haitians I met spoke of the daily terror of crime and violence that they face—robbery, kidnapping, murder just for fun—and these are the Haitians who can afford safer neighborhoods, protective walls adorned with barbed wire and broken glass, or perhaps armed guards. The greatest burden of crime, violence, and lawlessness falls on the poor. "We can't even hand things out to people in the slums—it would endanger them," explained a foreign social worker with nearly two decades of experience in Haiti's worst neighborhoods. "You know what would happen if we gave little

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radios? The bad guys would know about it right away—and they’d come into those homes to take the radios, and more.”

Lest there be a thought that Haiti’s poor have nothing to lose from gangs and crime but their radios, Dr. Jean William Pape, the latter-day Haitian-born Albert Schweitzer who directs GHESKIO, the country’s leading HIV-research institute/clinic, told me that the connection in Haiti between violent chaos and forcible rape was so immediate and direct that his staff compiles a “rape index” that serviceably mirrors changes in Haiti’s security environment just by tabulating the number of victims streaming into his clinics after sexual assaults. In a country where the government does not even bother to compile crime statistics, this may be the closest thing to a proxy for local crime rates that exists.

Why is there no physical security in Haiti today? The problem speaks to an abject failure of both the government of Haiti and the United Nation’s (UN) latest Haitian intervention force—MINUSTAH, the Francophone acronym for “United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti”—in their most fundamental of charges.

The Haitian government maintains no standing army, but merely a police force of perhaps 7,000. Only some of those police show up for work, and a troubling proportion of those who do show up are compromised, on the take from the very predators against which they are supposed to protect the public. To put the problem in perspective, consider this: New York City—with a population roughly comparable to Haiti’s and an environment incomparably more stable and secure—employs about 35,000 sworn police officers, a force perhaps ten times larger than the number of reliable Haitian police (the latter scattered over a country about two orders of magnitude larger in area than the five boroughs).

Apart from the occasions when they are identified as abetting kidnappings or gang rampages, Haiti’s police force is largely invisible. In my first two days of ranging through Port-au-Prince, I spotted police officers exactly twice, one of these instances being a spin near the presidential palace, the Haitian “White House.” In the slums of La Saline I passed a police station, but no one seemed to be there. Where were the officers? Hiding inside? Possibly so: the *téléjio*—Haiti’s national word-of-mouth

grapevine and main communications medium in this densely packed, illiterate nation—said that a band of police had just found itself outgunned in Port-au-Prince in a shootout with local gangsters, and had retreated to its headquarters. The police situation, however, was said to be improving. U.S. embassy personnel informed me that Haiti was training new police recruits in classes of 250—at which pace, by rough calculation, Haiti could muster a New York City-sized police force somewhere around the middle of this century, assuming zero attrition or mortality.

As for MINUSTAH and its 8,800 soldiers and police, some Haitians have taken to calling them TOURISTAH. As one Haitian explained to me, “We see them in our best restaurants, dating our women, and on our nicest beaches. The only place we don’t see them is where the crime and violence are taking place, where they are needed.” Constrained by extraordinarily restrictive “rules of engagement,” these UN forces remain far from their goal of “stabilizing” Haiti. Indeed, when UN secretary general Kofi Annan briefly visited Haiti in August to praise progress and call for more international aid, his advance team—even with the MINUSTAH force at hand—judged the security situation too perilous to risk scheduling a visit to Dr. Pape’s model GHESKIO clinic, located in downtown Port-au-Prince.

In a purely arithmetic sense, Haiti’s poverty today is a consequence of prolonged and severe economic retrogression—we might even say economic implosion. According to Maddison’s estimates, per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) in Haiti is roughly 25 percent lower now, at the beginning of the new century, than it was in 1945. Per-capita GDP was nearly twice as high in Haiti as in Bangladesh back in 1950, but by 2001, per-capita output was higher in Bangladesh than in Haiti (by about 15 percent). Haiti has been overtaken by Bangladesh not only in raw economic performance, but also in basic social performance: by World Bank estimates, life expectancy today is fully a decade higher in Bangladesh than in Haiti. According to the UN, in fact, Haiti’s life expectancy is no higher today than it was twenty years ago.

Indications of protracted decline abound. According to the World Bank, Haiti’s level of total cereal production is 20 percent lower today than it was in 1961—this,

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for a still predominantly rural society whose population more than doubled in the interim. Likewise, aggregate electricity generation is lower than it was a decade and a half ago, a modern record for futility surpassed perhaps only by Kim Jong Il's North Korea. Haiti once had a national railway line, but it is missing now, engulfed and absorbed in the brush. (Haiti has practically no forests; all the free firewood has already been taken.) Old State Department "Area Handbooks" speak of Haitian coffee as the country's main export. Modern-day U.S. agricultural officials talk of "Haitian blue" in tones akin to the North American bison—in other words, a magnificent species, sadly no longer much seen.

For any small island economy, international trade is vital, yet Haiti barely engages in it. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO), total merchandise exports for Haiti in 2005 amounted to \$473 million, or about \$55 per person. And as with so much else in Haiti, trends are heading in the wrong direction. In the capital's tiny Port Authority, where cargo from vessels docked in the harbor is still unloaded mainly by hand, officials tell me that freight volume is down 50 percent over the past two years. Rough calculations suggest that Haiti, a country self-sufficient in nothing, is bringing in through its port system rather less than a pound per person per day of food, gasoline, cement, trucks, clothing, paper, machinery, and other merchandise.

Haiti's other aperture to the world economy is an inland road through the highlands linking it to the Dominican Republic, its larger and markedly more successful neighbor on Hispaniola. But for the month before my arrival, that access point had been closed to all international commerce. Haiti had a newly appointed head of customs who entertained the peculiar idea of actually attempting to collect the statutory import duties listed on the books for incoming goods. Affronted and incensed, Haiti's major smugglers organized a trucking roadblock of the border, and then enforced it through menace. The government to date has proved incapable of lifting this self-embargo. There is quite a bit of talk about the lone honest Haitian official at the center of this trade crisis. It is said, for example, that Transparency International is thinking of honoring him with an award—if he lives long enough.

## The Haitian Legacy

It is no more than stating the obvious to say that Haiti's historical and political sagas are intimately entwined

with the dismal results we see today. We need not revisit every sorry stage and tragic step in the country's anguished 200-plus years of independence to understand the awful humanitarian spectacle. Yet the milestones of this historical legacy must be at least mentioned in passing. Haiti has African roots: over a hundred tribes or peoples were involuntarily transplanted to the New World to form the workforce of the French slave plantation system. Haiti was also subjected to a colonial interlude: the briefest, as a matter of fact, for any country in the New World (French rule in Haiti lasted only just over a century). There was a slave revolt: following the American Revolution chronologically, but informed by the merciless logic of the French Revolution, the slaves killed or drove out virtually all of the country's "white" former masters. And then, on New Year's Day in 1804, the troubled triumph of this Black Spartacus nation came to fruition with national independence.

In 202 years of sovereignty, Haiti has celebrated over twenty constitutions, nine presidents-for-life, a handful of self-proclaimed kings and emperors, and, if one is counting generously, three peaceful and legal transfers of presidential authority from one legitimately elected government to the next, one of which involves the current occupant of the National Palace, President René Préal, who assumed office under MINUSTAH's aegis earlier this year.

Recurring military interventions from abroad are also part of the Haitian legacy, usually, though not always, by American forces. Most memorable were the nineteen-year Marine Corps occupation of Haiti that commenced during World War I and, more recently, the UN-sanctioned American mission in the 1990s that temporarily restored to power Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the exiled, vengeful, radicalized, and corrupt—but popularly elected—president. (In 2004, when Aristide—reelected, but by then disgraced—reluctantly relinquished the presidency of a Haiti in turmoil and disarray, U.S. Marines returned once again before handing off international responsibility for the policing of Haiti to others under the UN flag.)

Haiti's heritage is so very African (only a tiny fraction of its people claim to be mixed-blood or "mulatto") that the west African traditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the culture of modern Haiti's original enslaved ancestors—have not only survived, but have taken on a life of their own in the New World. Voodoo is a touchstone here (a word, by no coincidence, that came from a language spoken in the west African country now

called Benin). A local aphorism has it that “Haiti is 90 percent Catholic and 100 percent voodoo.” Voodoo, indeed, one of the country’s two state-recognized religions. In its forbidding supernatural world, ordinary helpless mortals are at the mercy of a pantheon of *loa* and lesser undead beings—zombies, *loups-garous* (werewolves), and the like—who must be feared and may occasionally be traduced, but cannot always be propitiated.

The correspondence between voodoo and modern Haitian politics is more than incidental. Indeed, Haiti’s most powerful and arguably most successful political figure from the past century—François “Papa Doc” Duvalier—was literally a voodoo doctor. Papa Doc had an MD in modern medicine and trained at the University of Michigan, but he also carefully garbed himself in the dark black suit and the dour, unforgiving demeanor of Baron Samedi, the voodoo god of the graveyard. His control over Haiti was so total that his proposal to confer the next presidency-for-life upon his nineteen-year-old son “Baby Doc” carried a plebiscite by a vote of 2.5 million to one—so total that his decree to recast the Lord’s Prayer as an appeal to the Almighty Papa Doc did not evoke laughter from the Haitians obliged to recite it. Papa Doc ruled through fear, and his agents of terror were his personal gangs of armed, unsmiling, sunglasses-wearing thugs. These were the *tontons macoutes*, or Creole for “bogeysmen,” another homage to voodoo. They were not Haiti’s first criminal marauders in de facto authority, inflicting misfortune or tragedy by whim on the uncharmed and unlucky—nor, as we sadly see today, were they the last.

## Dismal Prospects

Modern Haiti has experienced a “withering away of the state,” to borrow a phrase from Karl Marx, but not at all in the way Marx anticipated for his Communist utopia. The government has ceased to provide security and physical safety in any regular or credible fashion. It no longer provides regular and reliable postal service. Its provision of electricity and water is limited and irregular. Health services rely mainly on the charity of strangers (also known as foreign aid).

Hardly less important, the government has excused itself from the task of educating the nation’s young. It is only a slight exaggeration to say there is no public

system, or even structure, for primary and secondary education in Haiti. The Haitian government, as best I can tell, does not collect and disseminate educational statistics anymore, and has basically no idea how many of the country’s children are in school or out of it. There is no question, however, that the educational profile is dismal. According to the country’s 2003 census, less than a quarter of all Haitians live in families in which the main provider has gone further than sixth grade, and half of Haiti’s families rely on breadwinners who have no formal schooling at all.

Knowledgeable Haitians and foreigners with whom I talked guessed that maybe half or three-fifths of Haiti’s children enter primary school these days, with maybe one-third of that fraction completing their primary education. They also guessed that the Haitian government provides no more than a tenth of the spaces for primary school these days; the rest come from private-sector “*écoles*” and “*colleges*,” most of which are tiny, store-front for-pay operations whose modest tuitions nevertheless pose a grim food-or-schooling question to families who wish to see their children get an education.

In today’s Haiti, even a rudimentary education looks to be beyond the reach of the majority of children: mass illiteracy is the likely prospect for the rising generation. If the failure to provide security deprives Haitians of the environment in which material advance is possible, the failure to educate deprives the population of the tools by which to achieve such advance.

Where do foreign aid and foreign assistance fit into this gruesome tableau? In the United States and elsewhere, there are voices quick to attribute Haiti’s dire circumstances to inadequate foreign generosity. According to the USAID “Green Book,” however, Haiti received a cumulative total of about \$3.5 billion (in 2004 dollars) in American economic and security assistance between 1946 and 2004—that is to say, over the roughly six decades in which its per-capita output achieved a decline of 25 percent. U.S. aid, moreover, was just one of many sources of concessional official transfers to Haiti. According to the World Bank, since 1969, Haiti has enjoyed a cumulative total of \$8.3 billion in official development assistance (measured in 2004 dollars).

To put these sums in perspective, the U.S. government places Haiti’s official exchange rate-based GDP for 2005

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at \$4.3 billion. While there are reasons to remain skeptical about that precise figure, as already noted, we can be more confident about another measure of the country's economic performance: merchandise export earnings. In 2004, according to the WTO, Haiti generated a little less than \$400 million through international sales of its own goods. Against that benchmark, foreign aid transfers would amount to over two decades' worth of Haitian exports. Whatever Haiti's many problems may be, an inadequate volume of foreign aid is not one of them.

## A Nation of Survival

Although Haiti's prospects are severely clouded, the picture is not completely without hope. Haiti now relies upon a million-plus community of émigrés in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere for remittances that may be the country's most effective economic lifeline at the moment. Those same émigrés could be pivotal in reconstructing and redeveloping Haiti if the business climate warranted the effort, invest-

ment, and risk. Haitians are resourceful and hard-working, as their very survival under current conditions attests. Haiti has capable, dedicated, and loyal allies, both foreign and domestic.

Some of the good works now underway are truly inspiring—among them, the Mother Teresa Missionaries of Charity home for abandoned children and the aforementioned GHESKIO HIV clinic/institute, both of which I had the privilege to visit. Other projects underway are incontestably beneficial and worthwhile, such as the microfinance initiative at Sogebank, providing loans of a few hundred dollars at a time to striving businesswomen who can put these loans to good use. Against all odds, some initiatives are bearing fruit: the nation's HIV prevalence, for example, has dropped in recent years and may have been cut by as much as half over the past decade. But all of these individual pockets of promise are as exposed and vulnerable as sandcastles at low tide: every speck of progress could be swept away, given the wild, unpredictable, and still-uncontrolled savagery into which this unhappy country has descended.

Haiti will be in a much better place than it is today when we can complain about corruption there. Haiti will be in a much better place than it is today when we

can focus our policy criticisms on bureaucratic inefficiency or wrongheaded economic and financial policies. What Haiti needs, more than anything else, is physical safety and security—for the sake of both the poor as well as the rich. By itself, physical safety would constitute an immense improvement in the local standard of living (measured in any real human sense). An environment of safety and security would make it possible—at least theoretically—to achieve social and economic development and material advance.

For now, those desiderata are not even remotely realistic objectives. A cautious political survivor, President

Préval now talks of “social appeasement”—a term that sounds no better in French or Creole than in English—and of opening a “dialogue” with the gangs that are murdering and terrorizing his countrymen. Safer streets are hardly the most likely outcome from such entreaties.

Under current conditions, foreign economic assistance—from the United States or elsewhere—can serve little more than a palliative function, akin to changing bandages on an open wound. While some will

argue there is merit and even nobility in such service, we should have no illusions about what such service can—and cannot—do.

What do we—the fortunate souls holding U.S. passports, with warm beds and hot meals awaiting us—come home learning from a brief fact-finding sojourn to Haiti? In a sentence, security comes first: first in the hierarchy of human needs and first in the prerequisites for economic progress. Apart from an unfondly remembered interlude under U.S. Marine Corps occupation in the early twentieth century, it is not clear that Haiti has ever had “law and order,” and maybe not even then. All it should strive for now are physical safety and security.

Without security, efforts to better the national plight will be doomed to frustration, or worse. Foreign economic assistance will be mainly wasted, or worse. Humanitarian assistance efforts will find themselves on an endless treadmill. Economic and humanitarian assistance are no substitute for security and safety—they cannot substitute for security and safety, nor can they create them. And what holds for Haiti holds just as true for other tortured regions of the world where governments receive foreign aid, but local populations do not receive safety.

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