

**THE UNITED STATES
IN HAITI**

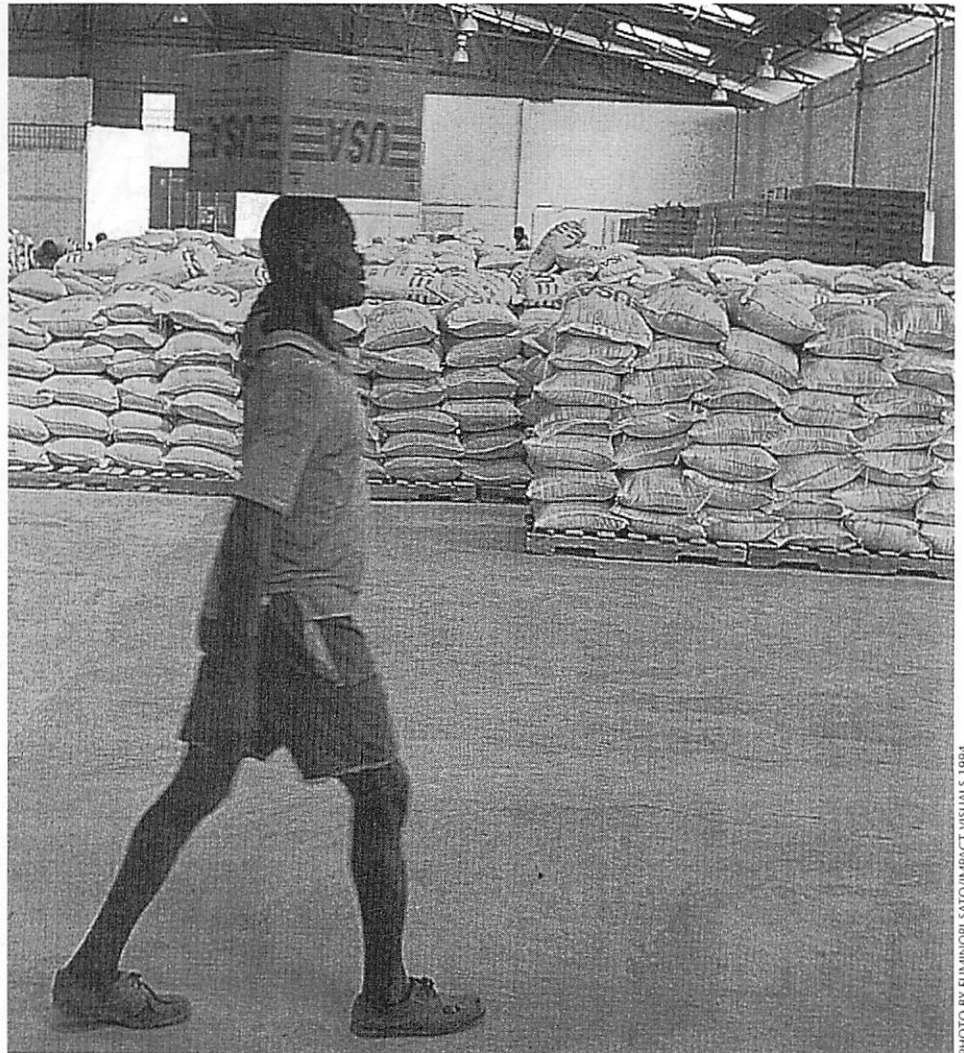
**HARVEST
OF HUNGER¹**

By **DEBORAH TOLER**
With **MARYTZA GAWLIK**

"Cedras and his armed thugs have conducted a reign of terror, executing children, raping women, killing priests." U.S. President Bill Clinton intoned in September 1994. "The message of the United States to the Haitian dictators is clear, your time is up. Leave now, or we will force you from power."²

Today the Clinton administration touts as a major foreign policy success the U.S. role in returning former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and ousting coup leaders Raoul Cedras and company. But as the "price" for his return, the Clinton administration, in conjunction with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, placed demands on President Aristide. The agreements President Aristide signed continue a long U.S. tradition of undermining Haiti's national food self-sufficiency and Haitian's household food security.

These neoliberal economic policies are an instant replay of the export driven



U.S. Food Aid Distribution in Haiti

policies in Africa and Central America discussed in Food First's last *News and Views* and *Backgrounder*, "Anatomy of a Disaster."³ Economic and political power will become further entrenched in the hands of a few if Haiti agrees to U.S. demands.

The U.S. and the international financial institutions are demanding that Haiti halve its civil service, privatize public services, slash tariffs and import restrictions, get rid of price and foreign exchange controls, grant "emergency" aid to the export sector, reinforce an "open foreign investment policy," create special corporate courts where "judges are more aware of the implications of their decisions for economic efficiency," rewrite its

corporate laws, limit the scope of state activity and regulation, and diminish the power of the executive branch in favor of the traditionally more conservative Parliament.⁴

If the government of President René Préal accepts these policy directions, it has been promised \$770 million in desperately needed financing, \$80 million of which goes immediately to pay the debt accrued to foreign banks during the three years following the 1991 Cedras coup.

Shocking though they may appear, this latest round of impoverishing policies are part of a historical continuum in Haiti. Indeed, the presence of U.S. troops in Haiti is not new. In 1915 President Woodrow

PHOTO BY FUMINORI SATO/IMPACT VISUALS 1994

Wilson sent U.S. Marines into what turned out to be a nineteen-year occupation. Both the 1915 and the 1994 U.S. invasions were ostensibly about restoring democracy and stability. But both were, in typical U.S. fashion, very much about U.S. geopolitical and economic interests.

The 1915–1934 U.S. occupation saw Haiti's constitution rewritten to allow, for the first time in the Republic's history, foreign ownership of land. Many U.S. companies successfully leased large tracts. Historian Suzy Carter has documented the concession of 266,000 acres of Haitian land to North American firms. Writing in a Haitian academic journal in 1929, Haitian scholar Georges Sejourne estimated that 50,000 peasants were displaced in the north alone.⁵

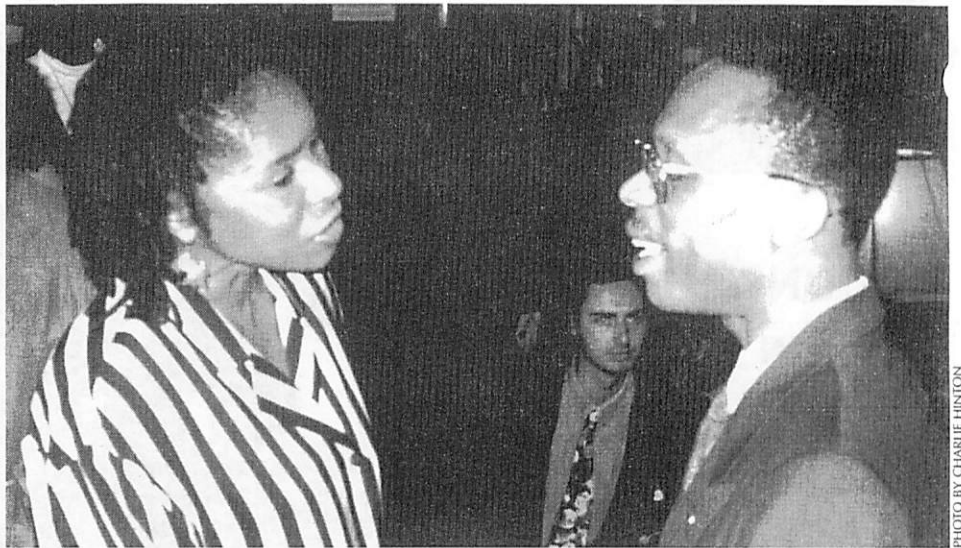
Since the time of the 1915 occupation, U.S. support for Haiti's military and U.S. economic strategies have resulted in ever increasing dependency on the U.S. and ever decreasing national and household food security. The ultimate outcome of U.S. military and economic involvement in Haiti has been a harvest of hunger for Haiti's poor majority.

HUNGER IN HAITI TODAY



Women working in a US-owned baseball factory in Port-au-Prince for \$2 per day.

In line with an earlier agreement reached with the Nixon administration and Reagan's Caribbean Basin Initiative to boost production in the region by offering access to U.S. markets, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) helped establish—with U.S. taxpayers' money—promotional offices in the Caribbean to lure investors to the region. This initiative concentrated on boosting assembly-line operations. This



Food First Senior Research Analyst Deborah Toler greets former President of Haiti Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

strategy produced the intended results. By 1987, manufactured goods rivaled agricultural exports in value. Assembly-industry exports averaged \$53.9 million yearly between 1980 and 1984, while coffee, a major export crop, earned \$53.2 million.⁶ U.S. investment represented 90 percent of total foreign investment in Haiti as of 1992; 95 percent of the country's light manufacturing exports were destined for U.S. markets.⁷ Household food security is directly tied to

the tragedy of this economic strategy. It is a strategy which has resulted in both high levels of unemployment and extremely low wages.

The legal minimum wage is three Haitian dollars, or U.S. \$1.85 per day (23 cents an hour). But workers told a New York City-based National Labor Committee investigative team that they actually make the equivalent of U.S. \$1.11 per day or 14 cents an hour. Even these

meager wages have been falling in recent years. During the last decade, Haitian wages dropped by 56 percent. In the meantime, Haitian exports to the U.S. doubled. With 70 percent of the workforce unemployed, each assembly job must now feed five to seven people. That works out to 39 cents per person per week, or six cents per day. It is impossible to meet even minimum food, clothing,

and shelter—much less health and education—expenses on wages this low.⁸

In Haiti U.S. food aid plays the same detrimental roles Food First has pointed out in books such as *Betraying the National Interest* that it plays in other countries.⁹ In 1994 USAID claimed it was feeding upwards of 70,000 Haitians per day. It insists U.S. food aid is not competing with Haitian production because the food provided is not grown in Haiti. But Haitian and U.S. researchers have concluded what Food First has argued for years—that U.S. food aid is undermining local production. Massive increases in U.S. food aid have driven down the prices of Haitian agricultural goods in local markets. Rice production dropped 35 percent in 1991–1992 alone. The U.S.-owned Comet Rice has a virtual monopoly on rice imports to Haiti. [See next page] Similarly, bean production dropped 20 percent; roots and tubers 15 percent, and sorghum 10 percent.¹⁰

In addition to undercutting prices for locally produced food, U.S. food aid is encouraging shifts in domestic eating habits. Historically corn meal was the everyday staple while rice was reserved for special occasions. When the glut of "Miami rice" imports made rice cheaper in the 1980s, it increasingly replaced corn in the diet, and Haitians came to prefer the higher quality imported rice over the locally grown product. These changes are, in sum, proving ruinous for a country where 70 percent of the population still depends on agriculture for their livelihood.¹¹

HAITIAN AND CALIFORNIA FARMERS

SQUEEZED BY THE SAME COMPANY¹

I will make you a bet of ten to one that, in a matter of months, relations are healed and the American Ambassador returns. You forget—Papa Doc is a bulwark against Communism. There will be no Cuba and no Bay of Pigs here. Of course there are other reasons. Papa Doc's lobbyist in Washington is the lobbyist for certain American-owned mills (they grind grey flour for the people out of imported surplus wheat — it is astonishing how much money can be made out of the poor with a little ingenuity).

Dr. Magiot, character in *The Comedians*, Graham Greene's 1965 novel set in Haiti.



HAITIAN RICE FARMER

PHOTO BY SEAN SPRAGUE/IMPACT VISUALS 1995

More than thirty years after Graham Greene wrote these lines, the U.S. owned Rice Corporation of Haiti (RCH) is bringing them back to life. According to a special Washington Office on Haiti (WOH) report, RCH began operations in September 1992 when former World Bank official and post 1991 coup leader Marc Bazin's regime signed a nine-year development aid contract with RCH. RCH's corporate parent is Comet Rice. Comet Rice has been the largest importer of rice to Haiti for many years. The flood of its imported "Miami rice" in the 1980s, much of it supported by U.S. tax dollars through various AID and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs, drove thousands of small-scale Haitian rice farmers out of business. Corn and other grain production also declined due to the importer's marketing techniques.²

Both RCH and Comet Rice are owned by a powerful U.S. company with a history of what the New York Times called "tainted trade".³ Their common parent is Erly, Inc., an international agribusiness and consulting conglomerate with a history of repeated irregularities and close ties to political power circles.⁴

Under the terms of the contract signed with the *de facto* government, RCH was supposed to improve Haiti's rice production, create jobs, and assure an ample supply of affordable rice to Haitian consumers. In

addition to importing a minimum of 5,500 metric tons of bulk processed rice, RCH was supposed to accomplish these objectives by establishing a rice processing plant in Haiti, providing technical assistance, technicians, and the transfer of technology and improvement of the distribution system. The Washington Office on Haiti report concludes that three years after the contract was signed, the agreement does not appear to have resulted in its intended objectives of making Haitian rice plentiful and of high quality or increasing Haitian rice production for sale to RCH for export.⁵

RCH and Comet Rice's roles in undermining food security in Haiti do not, in this day of globalization, leave U.S. citizens untouched. The plight of Haitian and U.S. rice farmers are intertwined. In December 1991, for example, "Comet Rice set the California rice industry on its ear when it shocked growers with returns that fell painfully below competitors prices" (*Sacramento Bee*, Feb. 17, 1992). While other California rice buyers that year paid \$1.70 to \$1.80 per hundred pounds above what the U.S. government was paying for rice, Comet—with no advance warning—paid 25 cents. The growers' loss amounted to approximately \$120 per acre. Not only did Comet fail to warn the rice growers of

what was coming, but that same year its parent company Erly, reported a net income of \$3.2 million—a sharp increase over the net earnings of \$455,000 it reported the year before. Over 150 growers resigned from their contracts with Comet and formed a new marketing pool.⁶

WOH'S REPORT ASKS A CRITICALLY IMPORTANT QUESTION:

"How much of RCH's activity—either directly or through its chain of corporate parents and siblings—has been funded by U.S. tax dollars? Various Erly company activities have been subsidized by AID, USDA and possibly other publicly funded agencies. Projects like RCH are typically championed as promoting the privatization and free trade needed to 'develop' Third World economies. Since the U.S. agribusiness system is enormously subsidized by the taxpayer it does not itself constitute either 'free trade' or 'privatized' industry."⁷ ■

CONCLUSION

United States dominance and the neoliberal strategy it and the World Bank and IMF insist upon are not going unchallenged. Food First is working with one of many Haitian research and activist organizations fully committed to reversing the tide of program and policies impoverishing the Haitian majority. The Haitian Advocacy Platform for an Alternative Development (PAPDA) is a collaborative organization dominated by small-scale farmers' groups. PAPDA carries out detailed research on the impacts of neoliberal policies; disseminates that information to Haitian activists and to associations of small-scale producers; makes the case against U.S. economic dominance and neoliberal policies in the Haitian and Western media, and most important - works with activists, workers, scholars, and farmers to identify and advocate for alternative strategies. In addition to providing PAPDA with Food First materials, Food First will be facilitating the dissemination of their work in the U.S. We also plan to establish exchange programs with PAPDA members and our partners in Cuba and Africa.

Food First joins a number of U.S. organizations — The 50 Years is Enough campaign, Global Exchange, Grassroots International, the National Labor Committee, Oxfam America, Partners in Health, and the Washington Office on Haiti among others — in trying to reverse U.S. policies causing hunger and poverty in Haiti. ■

NOTES: HARVEST OF HUNGER

1. In December 1996 Food First and the Boston based international development agency Grassroots International will release a joint Development Report examining current United States foreign aid in Haiti. This backgrounder is intended to provide a historical context for that upcoming report.
2. As longtime Haiti activist and scholar Paul Farmer notes, President Clinton neglected to mention that the thugs in the above statement were *our* thugs. The United States dismantled the Haitian military which had won independence from France in 1804 during our nineteenth year occupation of Haiti from 1915–1934. We replaced Haiti's original military with the army which overthrew democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991. See Paul Farmer, "The Significance of Haiti" in *Haiti, Dangerous Crossroads*, ed. by NACLA (Boston: South End Press, 1995), pp. 217 -218.
3. See Deborah Toler, "The Re-Colonization of Africa," *News & Views*, Spring 1996 and Christopher Cook and Peter Rosset, "Anatomy of a Disaster" *Backgrounder*, Spring 1996.
4. Kim Ives, "Haiti's Second Occupation" in *Haiti, Dangerous Crossroads*, pp. 116 - 117.
5. Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994), pp. 94- 95.
6. Michael S. Hooper, "Model Underdevelopment" in *Haiti, Dangerous Crossroads*, pp. 141.
7. Ridgeway and Treger, "AIDing and Abetting" p. 11. See also, *A Cautionary Tale: The Failed U.S. Development Policy in Central America*, Michael E. Conroy, Douglas L. Murray, and Peter M. Rosset, Boulder, CO: Food First Development Studies, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996.
8. Ridgeway and Treger, "AIDing and Abetting" p. 11.
9. See Frances Moore Lappé, Rachel Schurman, & Kevin Danaher, *Betraying the National Interest* New York: Food First / Grove Press, 1987).
10. Ridgeway and Treger, "AIDing and Abetting" p. 12.
11. Washington Office on Haiti, *Special Issue Report—Rice Corporation of Haiti*, S.A. October 1995, p. 10.

NOTES: HAITIAN AND CALIFORNIA FARMERS

1. What follows was extracted from an excellent and detailed Washington Office on Haiti, *Special Issue Report—Rice Corporation of Haiti*, S.A. October 1995.
2. Washington Office on Haiti, *Special Issue Report—RCH*, p. 9.
3. *New York Times*, October 1993 cited in Washington Office on Haiti, *Special Issue Report—RCH*, pp. 7 -8.
4. James Ridgeway and Jean Jean-Pierre recently reported of Erly subsidiary American Rice that it "established enough of a foothold in the Haitian political scene that in January 1995, it thought it worth the trouble of flying five congressional staffers to Haiti. According to the *National Journal*, the trip was assisted by the State Department and the U.S. embassy helped arrange a busy schedule that included a 45-minute meeting with then President Aristide." "Mission Impossible?" *Village Voice*, May 14, 1996, p. 35.
5. Washington Office on Haiti, *Special Issue Report—RCH*, p. 10. Note that specifics of the agreement are included in this superbly researched report. See pp. 2 -3.
6. Washington Office on Haiti, *Special Issue Report—RCH*, p.7.
7. Washington Office on Haiti, "Introduction" to *Special Issue Report—RCH*, p.2.

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