

Reparation day

A call for \$21 billion from France aims to lift Haiti's bicentennial blues

By Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, 1/4/2004

THE MODERN NATION of Haiti was founded 200 years ago after the first and only successful slave revolt in the Americas. Today it is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. To historians, the connection between these two facts has long been obvious. But even as the beleaguered republic launched its bicentennial on Thursday with celebrations marred by protests, debate swirls around a campaign by the Haitian government to link one to the other.

Haiti has called upon France -- the ousted former colonizer of historical Saint-Domingue -- to pay restitution of \$21,685,135,571.48. President Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti first outlined that demand last April, in a speech honoring the 200th anniversary of the death of revolutionary hero Toussaint L'Ouverture. At every stop on the bicentennial trail, the president has repeated his cry. He declared in November, "Poverty today is the result of a 200-year plot . . . In 1803 and in 2003, this is the same plot. Do you understand my message?" At Thursday's celebration, he announced a new 21-point development program to be funded with the restitution payments.

Why \$21 billion? It's the modern equivalent of the 90 million francs Haiti agreed to pay France in 1825, in return for official recognition of Haiti's sovereignty. For two decades following Haitian independence in 1804, the former mother country, with the support of the United States, Britain and Spain, enforced a crippling embargo, accompanied by a threat to recolonize and reenslave Haiti if indemnity wasn't paid for lost property -- i.e., slaves. Haiti, once France's richest colony, agreed to pay the price -- more than twice the value of the entire nation at the time -- but could only afford to do so using high-interest loans from French banks.

Two centuries later, the Haitian government's annual revenues are a mere \$237 million, about 1,000 times less than those of France. In his 1994 book, "The Uses of Haiti," Dr. Paul Farmer of Harvard Medical School, a longtime public health advocate in Haiti, ironically described the indemnity as "a business expense," a political necessity that left the country so economically and politically ravaged that democracy could never take root. But in Haiti itself, since the call for restitution went out last April, it's more common to hear those 90 million francs referred to as "ransom."

"La dette de l'indépendance" has become a defining issue of the bicentennial. For many, the call revives the revolutionary spirit of the nation. As historian Laurent Dubois of Michigan State University writes in his forthcoming book, "Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution" (Harvard University Press), Haiti's Declaration of Independence was modelled on the United States' founding document, but marked by a triumphant fury.

In order to draw up our act of independence," wrote the young Haitian officer who revised the first draft, "we need the skin of a white to serve as a parchment, his skull as an inkwell, his blood for ink, and a bayonet for a pen." The Haitian flag was created by ripping the white panel -- representing the slaveholders -- from the French tricolor. Aristide styles himself as defender of the revolution -- first elected in 1990 after the fall of the Duvaliers, ousted by junta, then restored by American force. But today he rules

under eroding legitimacy, as anti-Aristide demonstrations regularly swell the streets of Port-au-Prince. Repressive violence by pro-government gangs have marked his return to power in 2000. General elections in May of that year were deemed fraudulent by the Organization of American States. As a result, international banks, led by the United States, have withheld more than \$500 million in aid. Randall Robinson, author of "The Debt," the bestselling call for reparations for slavery in America, denounced the move as "a bloodless coup."

Indeed, Aristide's call for \$21 billion from France echoes the much-maligned campaigns throughout the African diaspora for reparations for centuries of slavery, colonialism, and crimes against humanity. (The French parliament recognized the transatlantic slave trade as such in May 2001. Despite Bill Clinton's "apology" for slavery, the United States has never made such a declaration.) Besides the highly polarized debate in the United States, South African apartheid victims have sued several US corporations that profited from the regime, and the Herero ethnic group of Namibia has demanded reparations for genocide during Germany's oft-forgotten colonial era. Even Libya has spoken of pursuing reparations for the 700,000 people killed when the country was occupied by Italy. Some hope that French payments to Haiti would invigorate the global reparations movement. But according to the Haitian opposition, Aristide's campaign adopts the defiance of newly freed slaves without any of their righteousness. In October, many of Haiti's most prominent artists and intellectuals signed a petition denouncing the restitution call and official bicentennial celebrations as a subterfuge. In a statement to the French daily *Le Monde*, Haitian sociologist Laennec Hurbon scoffed, "People are not easily duped by this imaginary battle launched by an illegitimate government against a country presented as some maleficent entity responsible for the lack of water, electricity, or cars in the shantytowns."

The French government has balked at the demand, citing "bad governance" and the 200 million Euros (about \$250 million) of aid already dedicated to Haiti since 2000. But last October, French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin created a commission on Franco-Haitian relations, chaired by the leftist intellectual Regis Debray. The group is scheduled to make recommendations at the end of this month.

At least two pro-restitution advocates have already been called before the commission. Christophe Wargny is a French historian and former Aristide ally who broke with the president in 2000, citing his "drift towards an obscurantist despotism." "France owes that money to Haiti," Wargny argued in an interview with independent Haitian news source *Alterpresse*, though he advocates a neutral French body that would disburse the funds to avoid mishandling.

Paul Farmer, whose longtime efforts in Haiti are profiled in Tracy Kidder's new book, "Mountains Beyond Mountains" (Random House), ended his testimony with a passionate appeal: "Will the happy winners of the world's history settle in their distressing routine or will they finally break off from cruel, corrupted, and racist politics? Will they finally give back to Haiti the price of its blood?"

Historian Laurent Dubois thinks the world indeed owes something to Haiti. "Anyone who lives in a democratic society in which race doesn't equal a denial of rights has some debt to the Haitian revolution," he reflected in an interview. "The very notion of democracy that we consider commonsense emerged because of that revolution. If that's something

we cherish then we owe that to Haiti, which has suffered more for its victory rather than been rewarded for it. That is how I would picture the restitution."
Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts is a writer living in New York.
