

Nothing to Celebrate

A leading figure of the U.S. civil rights movement, Dorothy Cotton visited Haiti in early June as part of an international factfinding mission.

The trip coincided with the U.S. government's decision to repatriate Haitians to their homeland. An FOR national council member, Cotton's trip was sponsored by the FOR's Task Force on Latin America and the Caribbean.

A Haitian Journal by Dorothy F. Cotton

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Pictures do lie. On colorful postcards, Haiti is a land of festivity and celebration. Yet the island I visited in June, disembarking on docks swelled with a human mass of tired and poor rejected by the United States and returned by the Coast Guard, showed anything but a carnival atmosphere. Across the island, our factfinding team heard no music, saw no dancing, witnessed no celebrating. If it is preposterous to suggest that Haitians have anything to celebrate, remember that they have

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Haitians being repatriated (above) can look forward to returning to the worst poverty in the hemisphere (left). But contrary to U.S. government claims, many will suffer political repression, including torture and death. Often, the crime is being a rumoured supporter of deposed President Aristide.

Haiti: Nothing to Celebrate

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just inherited a new government, of Prime Minister Marc Bazin, whose supporters say is the new people's choice over exiled president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. But if that is true, then today's Haitians have developed an uncharacteristically silent way of showing their support. Only the artists paint on, dreaming of the landscapes they know in their hearts, that could someday be real, if only...

"This is no party time," confirms the manager of Hospice St. Joseph, the most popular hotel in Haiti. "We're messed up. And only military intervention will change things."

Our eight-member Global Exchange delegation sought to learn more about Haiti's social and political state of affairs, and particularly, why the country's boat people so desperately sought to leave their homeland. We also sought to determine if economic hardship was the whole story.

We began our official schedule meeting with the staff of PAJ (Peace and Justice) who gave us an overview of their work. In addition to PAJ, we met with AHP (Agence Haitienne de Presse), The Institute of Technology and Animation, Haitian Conference of Nuns and Priests, ITECA (a grass-roots training program), a representative of Reuters News Service, representatives of clandestine news organizations, small churches, organizations and individuals who had personally suffered under the current regime. We also met with students and church officials.

Through the people we met, both interested parties and unbiased observers, we saw a picture of escalating repression, but also the incredible courage of people who still keep faith that democracy will return, and hope that the jubilation around the democratic election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide will not have been a fluke. Yet the organizations that are still working for a return of democracy do so with great caution and secrecy and Spartan resources.

A case in point was that of two men who came out of hiding to visit our delegation. A dentist, Dr. Guerrier had stories of incredible terror and courage. On September 25 last year, his small clinic was burned to the ground, with his mother and seven-month-old infant child inside. On September 3, his wife was kidnapped and killed; her body was found the next day. His "crime" was suspicion of being an Aristide supporter. On December 24, Dr. Guerrier decided to run away to Guantanamo Bay. He was interviewed and sent to the section for those who seemed to be political refugees. As the delegation became larger and larger, he noticed that it appeared he was being reclassified. Someone arranged for him to talk with five American lawyers. He informed the lawyers that he had already had a full interview and papers approving his coming to the United States. On April 28, a group of men came in military uniforms and took him to a boat.

He never saw the Miami skyline. The next day, that boat landed him back in Haiti. With his medical degree and license to practice dentistry still with the American lawyers, Dr. Guerrier returned unable to make any money to provide for his two remaining children and his grandmother, who is attempting to care for them "And to feed me when I can get to them," he sighed.

Upon arrival back in Haiti, the Red Cross was kind, he said; the Haitian military were very rough and informed all the men (after letting the women go) that "there is a file on

you and you're responsible for anything that happens in Haiti." One officer singled him out and asked "Why are you here? I thought you were one of those who left and was saying bad things about us." That night, three officers came to his house, beat his younger brother and his seventy-nine-year-old grandmother. Both had their arms broken. "Piere is a witness to that," he added. (Piere is a Haitian friend of the doctor who was one of our delegation. Piere was an excellent host and contact for helping us speak with people who had been brutalized and with clandestine press people.)

Dr. Guerrier is considering going to the American Embassy to see if he can get out, but he is clearly a marked man and afraid.

With him was Arlom Dobel, a chauffeur, who was seized as he passed an area that still displayed one of the very few

Aristide posters. Two policemen took him to jail, where he was severely beaten and placed in a cell for seven days. On the seventh day, he was taken out, and beaten again. When he tried to block the blows with his hand, his arm was broken.

We saw X-rays of the multiple fractures; the cast had just been removed only two days at our visit. Dobel showed us the stripes on his back and the wounds on his thighs. Neither of these men were given a reason for the violence against them. In Dobel's case, the supposed policemen took down the poster he was passing and brought it along to the jail as proof of his crime. As we pursued reasons for those selected for brutality, many said that people are selected to be made examples and to ensure that the people are kept in fear and intimidation.

In spite of the wide omnipresence of police and pseudo-law enforcement officials, neither law nor order reign in Haiti. In the Hospice Saint Joseph's quarters where our delegation was housed, we heard shooting in the neighborhood at night on two occasions. In the morning, neighbors in the tin shanties next door told us that a thief had been caught. The police were called, but the neighbors were already beating him. When they informed the police of the reason for the call and their beating, the police said, "Go ahead then." They beat the man to death.

A businessman, Georges Izmeary was shot in front his store by a plain clothes individual. Someone called Mr. Izmeary's parents and when they arrived, their son lay bleeding on the sidewalk; he was still breathing. As the parents arrived, a group of military men (who eyewitnesses say stood idly by watching the killing) surrounded the dying man and his family. They would not allow the parents to take him. The military took the still-breathing man to the morgue, where a sign was placed on him reading "identity unknown." Later the family was allowed to plan for his funeral, which would be a very large one. Many thought he had been killed because he was mistaken for his brother; a more political member of the well-known family that had publicly supported Aristide.

The funeral was allowed, but as the crowd left the church there was suddenly an air of celebration and shouts of "Long live Aristide!" The police attacked, leaving many badly injured. Everyone with whom we spoke said that all gatherings, large and small, are subject to such attacks.

We met with Edwige Balutansky of Reuters News Service. This Haitian reporter has found a way to continue to report the news. "There is a movement here," she said, "but there is no freedom to organize. Repression is complete and very much in place. Every policeman in uniform is accompanied by three to five men who are not in uniform. They

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watch and listen and report." When I asked how people allowed others to function as snitches, which often meant reporting on anyone making comments favorable to Aristide, Edwige responded "People are forced to become accomplices, either for some favor, such as momentarily relieving their poverty, or under threat of violence. Some, as so-called regional managers, can extort money from the poorest people. If they don't pay they are beaten and their houses robbed.

"The poverty is so severe and the economy is on the rocks, not because of the [UN international trade] embargo, but because of corruption. People pay to be born, pay to die. They pay to hide in a new area, and pay power hungry section managers in order to sell bread and to have cock fights. They must pay to vote, though not legally. And everyone knows there is nothing that will be done about any of the extortions or the beatings. Terror is organized at the local level as well as nationally. Section chiefs may legally extract a dollar as a 'tax' for nothing, and two dollars if they feel powerful enough."

Large landowners divide their land in tiny parcels to rent to families who try to farm. If they are able to sell anything they grow, they must give the landowner a portion of the meager proceeds. Big business is viewed as in league with the dictatorships, from the Duvalier days right up to the present. There is a pervasive belief that drugs are an integral part of the system of repression; many Haitians say that the military and police are known to be a part of the drug smuggling business.

I was taken through Cite Soleil, reputed to be the worse slum area in the Western Hemisphere. One can readily see how this is so: thousands of connecting tin shanties; people living next to block after block of garbage; with people, pigs, goats, a few chickens, swarms of flies and children all intermingling. I saw people scooping water from a trickling stream down a filthy street. The inhuman conditions are not believable without seeing them. Even photographs cannot convey the reality. There is no concept of privacy in Cite Soleil. People—both men and women—unashamedly relieve themselves in the midst of the dense crowd. There is really nowhere to go.

And yet, there is hope. Enroute to Cite Soleil, we passed a corner where Martin Luther King, Jr. Ave. intersected with John Brown Street. How symbolic of the hope that we also noted as we met with a broad range of representatives of organizations and individuals working for change and knowing that change will come. There is ITECA, The Institute for Technology and Animation, an important basic organization created to train local leadership. Local leaders are trained in necessary technology and its interconnection with social problems. This so reminded me of the Citizenship Education Program given by Highlander Folk School and Southern Christian Leadership Conference that Andrew Young and I worked on in the U.S. civil rights movement. ITECA works from the philosophy that basic change must come from the people. It is a mixture of community organizing, consciousness raising and energizing folk. That people must change is the teaching; and the people have changed, having learned, in the words of ITECA's director, to manifest themselves in pressuring Duvalier to leave and in electing Jean-Bertrand Aristide. But in the more repressive atmosphere following the coup against Aristide, he recognizes

the new realities of this grassroots training. "We must work in the rhythm of the country; if the people are in hiding, we work there," he said.

There is the "Little Churches" organization, where people are coming together to learn how to bring the gospel to their real problems. Our meeting with this group was one of the more moving experiences; with church representatives wearing their anxieties on their sleeves, yet continuing to meet. They spoke of the larger churches being impersonal and not touching their lives.

PAJ, Peace And Justice, is a more formally organized group with a larger network to help people who are brutalized. PAJ helps get people out of prison, takes injured people to one of the five doctors they can trust, or brings a doctor to the injured person and generally works to help victims of repression. PAJ is a well-known human rights group in Haiti.

There is CRAD, Center for Research and Development, involved primarily in the ghettos and with women who are part of small economic ventures. CRAD's philosophy is that people must work collectively, and learn to utilize what they have to the maximum to be more effective. There is Mission Alpha, a post-Duvalier literacy effort closed down after the coup; it was viewed as a threat. The goal of Mission Alpha was to pattern after Cuba and other places where literacy programs have been a huge success.

We asked what the international community could do. The responses were nearly unanimous: "The army should be disarmed and some key military people removed to begin to create a sense of stability. Drug traffic must be interrupted, and all of this must be done with Aristide, for he is a symbol of justice. There was hope with him. The people elected him, and no one tried to leave Haiti during the seven months he was in power." One group quoted Cedras (a former military head) as saying "There are three things you need for power: money, the army and the Americans. The Americans never really accepted Aristide; their policy is two-faced. Americans pretend to support the democratically elected President, but also apparently support this violent military regime."

There is widespread suspicion that the United States has been a part of the destabilization of the democratic initiatives in Haiti. There is a strong feeling that the election of Bazin was a U.S. initiative and a done deal for some time. There is much concern that the disinformation and blatantly false charges against Aristide will be accepted by people who don't bother to get the facts. Those who do hope to see more groups come to Haiti: to get the facts, to help raise the consciousness of the international community, and to build solidarity with all the people struggling for justice in this painfully oppressed country.

There is more open repression, but also more rebellion. "Down with Cedras; long live Aristide!" shouted one woman at the docks where the Coast Guard was returning the boat people. A man explained her seemingly-suicidal action to us: "We prefer to die standing up."

It is indeed no party time in Haiti. It is time to understand the depth and breadth of the social, economic and political repression there, and, if we can, to take strength in the realization that our work for peace with justice is very much needed.

Dorothy Cotton lives and works in Ithaca, New York.



Signs of hope: memorial to northern heroes.