

# The horrors of Haiti

**By David Pratt**

sundayherald.com | February 22, 2004

**I**t all happened in a mad terrifying rush of rocks, bullets and machete-wielding maniacs. From the corner of my eye I saw Sunday Herald photographer and colleague Stewart Attwood hit by a rock. With blood from a nasty head wound running down his neck and shirt, he struggled to get to his feet and away as a gunshot rang out, the bullet instantly smashing into a stationary car close by. Another American photographer, who moments later toppled beside Attwood, was struck down by blows from a group of mad-eyed “chimères” – hired thugs and supporters of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide – who had rushed towards us.

In the midst of the maelstrom, as anti-Aristide protesters and foreign journalists alike fled in every direction, I became separated from my colleagues. Suddenly, in a narrow side street, I found myself fending off blows to my neck and shoulders – luckily from the flat side of a machete – before running into a labyrinthine marketplace with three chimères chasing behind me.

“Monsieur, Monsieur, here quick!” an old woman called, before ushering me beneath her butcher’s stall and pulling a cover over the front to keep me out of sight. Hidden for a few minutes until my pursuers had given up the hunt, the woman’s son then kindly led me through a maze of muddy passageways back out to the main road to rejoin my friends.

As the rebellion and civil war wrack the north of the country and Aristide’s rule teeters on the brink of oblivion, Port-au-Prince is a dangerous place to be. Fear of a coup, and the bloodletting and anarchy that would follow, run through the streets like the open sewers that criss-cross the city’s sprawling slums.

This weekend’s latest protests, which left another 20 wounded, were always going to end in violence. For three hours or more, before they took to Port-au-Prince’s rubbish-filled streets, thousands had rallied at the city’s university to hear speakers from trade union and student groups demand that Aristide must go.

In a burnt-out car, toy pistol in hand, an effigy of the one-time popular slum priest Aristide was symbolically drenched in blood-red paint.

Since sweeping to power in the 1990 elections to become Haiti’s first elected leader after decades of dictatorships, Aristide has seen his once-huge popularity fade amid accusations of corruption and continuing misery from the legions of Haiti’s poor.

## The horrors of Haiti | 2

Critics say the president has bought loyalty in Port-au-Prince's shanty towns through patronage and by franchising drug trafficking rights. Aristide and his government, meanwhile, accuse their opponents of being a small mulatto (mixed race) elite, virulently opposed to the country being run by its poor, black majority.

With their numbers swelling as the hours passed during this weekend's opposition rally, masses of people danced and sang protest songs. Many were clearly psyching themselves up for confrontation with the *chimères*, who are often seen stalking the streets clutching automatic rifles and wearing black masks.

Some opposition supporters were already wearing masks of their own, mainly of the surgical variety which has become *de rigueur* in combating the effects of the choking tear gas that is inevitably fired at them as they sweep through the city's streets.

"Aristide is a motherfucker. He should go now or Port-au-Prince will become another Gonaives or Hinche," asserted one student, draped in a red and blue Haitian flag, his face beaded with sweat and his breath reeking of booze.

Both Gonaives and Hinche are among a handful of northern towns taken by another opposition group whose members have, unlike those in the capital, resorted to armed rebellion.

Haiti has always had a reputation for the unpredictable. This once-beautiful Caribbean island has, after all, been run by the likes of the corrupt "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his sinister secret police, the *Tontons Macoutes*. It is also home to what last year became an officially recognised religion – voodoo.

Whatever the ultimate motives and ambitions of Aristide himself, or those of his opponents, the root causes of Haiti's current unrest are there for all to see. For this is the land of the haves and the have-nots. A place where quite literally the higher up you live, the further up the social ladder you are. This is a two-tier nation that rises from the slums of *Cité Soleil* and *Saint Martin*, where hundreds of thousands cram into reclaimed swampland and cemeteries, to the cool hills above the slums where the wealthy live in the gated communities of *Petionville*, with their fine restaurants catering to a very different side of Haitian life.

This is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, and the world's least developed country outside Africa. According to the United Nations, half the country is malnourished. Life expectancy is 49 years. To realise just how cheap life is in Haiti and the crushing poverty that underpins it, one need only drive at night into the *Marche en Fer* district in downtown Port-au-Prince. I say drive, because to walk here displaying any semblance of wealth is to invite robbery. During daylight hours *Marche en Fer* is a sprawling ramshackle market area, filled with stalls and traders. By night, however, it is transformed into one of the most pitiful

## The horrors of Haiti | 3

scenes that prove how brutalising poverty and the sex trade are inextricably inter-related.

“Look, she is nothing but a child, and that girl there, pregnant – my God,” points out Jean François Roosevelt, a local journalist who is campaigning and working with humanitarian agency Concern Worldwide to highlight and improve access to information about HIV/Aids among the sex workers in the area and across Port-au-Prince.

Here in Marche en Fer, he tells me, the going rate for sex is as little as 50 US cents. Many of the girls working the district are barely in their teens, simply taking their clients behind the empty market stalls among the rotting produce and rats that overwhelm the area.

No-one knows the extent of HIV/Aids in Haiti, but conservative estimates, Roosevelt says, would put it at 6%, a figure comparable with some of Africa’s worst-affected countries.

The darkened streets, lit only by open fires where Marche en Fer’s terrible night-time trade takes place, lie barely a few minutes’ walk from Aristide’s gleaming white presidential palace, perpetually lit up like a Christmas tree. Inside the palace, it has been confirmed, many of Aristide’s 60 or so personal bodyguards from a private American security firm are almost permanently housed.

It really beggars belief that all this exists an hour-and-a-half’s flight from glittering Miami, and less than three hours from New York City.

If some self-obsessed Americans have been known to call the United States “God’s own country,” then much of Port-au-Prince is closer to the terrifying existence depicted in the recently acclaimed film *City Of God* about the gang wars and poverty that rage inside Brazil’s own slums, or favelas.

Saint Martin, in Port-au-Prince, could easily be mistaken for a giant set from that film.

In one area, some 60,000 people are crammed into one square kilometre, living one on top of another in an indescribably filthy warren of alleyways and concrete houses that resembles little more than a giant open-air rubbish tip. The smell of excrement and rotting garbage in the searing Caribbean heat clings to your clothes and nostrils until you have a chance to wash and change after a visit to Saint Martin.

I was told how “shift sleeping” is common here. With many single cupboard-sized rooms too small to house an entire family at any one time, people have been known to bed down on a rota basis, four hours inside and four hours in the alleyways outside.

One such family, which rented a room the width of an arm span and meant only for storage space, “shift slept” mother, father and three children.

Recently, a cash-strapped Aristide government is said to have started clawing back arrears of 15 and 20 years’ rent of 45 Haitian gourdes (\$1) a month from families who had moved into Saint Martin all that time ago and lived rent-free in spaces that were not originally deemed worth charging anything for.

## The horrors of Haiti | 4

Just how, when unemployment is probably 80% in areas like Saint Martin, do people make ends meet? “I get money from lenders but the interest is enormous,” said Marie Carme, a single mother who struggled to bring up her three children even before her husband left her.

As we talked, dogs tore and gnawed at offal mixed among the mountains of rubbish lying outside her front doorway, and one of her sons coughed continuously. Tuberculosis, malnourishment, malaria, and rat bites are rife here.

But what about the repayments, I asked. How do you make them? “I borrow from one lender, and pay him by borrowing from another, but there is never enough left over to feed us,” Carme told me.

Her dream of sending all her boys to school, and perhaps even college or university, is as much wishful thinking as having a full belly on any given day.

As well as the army of rats and vermin that outnumber the people of Saint Martin, there is another breed of human predators. For this is the domain of the likes of Baz Cameroon and Dentes en Fer (Iron Teeth), rival gangs who mix political and criminal motives and objectives. Some of these gangs, it is said, are actively recruited or paid by Aristide’s government to help meet his political ends. But mention such things here, and people simply change the subject or look at you with incredulity for daring to venture such a view.

As almost everywhere else in Haiti, it is ordinary people concerned only with the day-to-day feeding of their children and clinging to survival that get caught in the crossfire.

The story of a woman called Carmilla and her son is only one of many examples. It was early evening one day last year when the gangs came for Carmilla’s son. No-one really knows why they wanted to take him away, but when Carmilla tried to intervene she was gunned down along with her son. With neighbours too terrified to go near the scene, their bodies lay for hours beside the giant open sewer, grandly named the Rocke feller Canal, that runs through Saint Martin.

“Whatever the reasons as to why the gangs wanted her boy, Carmilla was only trying to protect him like any mother would,” said Eva David, a project co-ordinator with Concern, which works in Saint Martin providing the only health and educational support in a district where the government has yet been unable even to provide clean water to the families living there.

As Haiti spirals towards a potentially violent shift in power and escalating civil war, even the famed annual carnival that started this weekend is failing to be a cause for celebration. Outside the presidential palace, as joiners and painters put the finishing touches to the

## The horrors of Haiti | 5

stands and floats that will be the centrepiece of this year's event, the mood, some locals told me, was subdued. As ever though, the streets were full of the ordinary working people for whom Aristide was once a hero. An army of flat-tyre fixers and tap-tap minibus drivers, trough-cleaners, garbage pickers and cart pullers. Haiti's voters, many of whom have lost all faith in the man who once preached revolution.

As my American Airlines flight flew into Port-au-Prince over its most infamous slum, Cité Soleil, the song, Should I Stay Or Should I Go? by The Clash was playing over the in-flight music channel. Few listeners would have missed the poignancy of the message. With flights out of Haiti now booked to bursting point as US and other foreign nationals flee the country, it seems they, at least, have already made up their minds about where the country's immediate future lies.

---

*David Pratt is foreign editor of the Glasgow-based Sunday Herald, Scotland's national Sunday newspaper.*