

Haiti Reconstruction: Factories, not Fields

By Kim Ives

IN MARCH, HAITIAN PRESIDENT RENÉ PRÉVAL called on the United States to “stop sending food aid” to Haiti “so that our economy can recover and create jobs.” He was discussing strategies to rebuild his country, still reeling from the devastating earthquake on January 12. A crucial part of that rebuilding effort, Préval argued, would be to undo the ruin visited upon Haitian farmers by the free or low-cost surplus grains that for years have been dumped on the country as a “gift from the people of the United States,” as many USAID-packaged food sacks read. Préval, a former agronomist, added that he wanted to see most of the reconstruction aid headed toward Haiti invested in the country’s agriculture, which has dramatically shriveled over the past two decades of neoliberal assault.

Préval was only reflecting popular opinion in Haiti, at least according to the results of United Nations–sponsored focus groups. At the March 31 “International Donors Conference Towards a New Future for Haiti,” held at UN headquarters in New York, Haitian journalist Michèle Montas presented the results of the Voices of the Voiceless Forum, which held discussions with Haitian peasants, workers, and small merchants in March. Montas reported that, together with housing, education, health care, local public services, and communications infrastructure, agriculture figured as the respondents’ top priority in reconstruction efforts. “Agriculture, perhaps more than other sector, is seen as essential to the country’s health,” Montas said, “and the prevailing sentiment is that the peasantry has been neglected.”

But Guatemalan diplomat Edmund Mulet, the acting head of the UN Mission to Stabilize

Haiti (MINUSTAH), has pooh-poohed the idea that agriculture should take center stage in the country’s reconstruction. Rather, Mulet “envision[s] factories being moved from the city to the countryside,” reported Nathaniel Gronewold of Greenwire. “Farming is out of the question, [Mulet] insists, as the land is already spoken for, so a service-oriented economy must be built instead,” Gronewold reported. The “factories” Mulet has in mind are in fact typical sweatshops, where U.S. manufacturers take advantage of Haiti’s \$3-a-day minimum wage.

At the same time, however, Mulet and others have deceptively echoed the sentiments of many Haitians that Washington and the United Nations have sabotaged the Haitian state for decades. “We complain because the government is not able to (lead), but we are partly responsible for that,” Mulet said, according to the Associated Press. Worse, the patchwork of about 900 foreign and thousands more Haiti-based NGOs do not coordinate, take on too many roles, and swarm well-known neighborhoods while leaving others untouched—doing what Mulet called “little things with little impact.”

But the prize for dissimulation must go to the pioneer of modern political doublespeak, Bill Clinton, UN special envoy for Haiti. On March 10, Clinton testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, offering an unprecedented mea culpa for having championed the cuts in Haitian tariffs in the 1990s that destroyed the country’s rice industry. “It may have been good for some of my farmers in Arkansas,” Clinton said, “but it has not worked. It was a mistake. I had to live every day with the consequences of the loss of capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people because of what I did, nobody else.”

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At the donors' conference, I asked Clinton what had led him to renounce the policies he once touted. "Oh, I just think that, you know, there's a movement all around the world now," Clinton responded, perhaps alluding to global resistance to neoliberal food policies. He went on to say that "the wealthy agricultural producing countries . . . and the emerging agricultural powers . . . really believed for 20 years that if you moved agricultural production there and then facilitated its introduction into poorer places, you would free those places to get aid to skip agricultural development and go straight into an industrial era. And it's failed everywhere it's been tried. . . . We made this devil's bargain on rice [in Haiti]. And it wasn't the right thing to do. We should have continued to work to help them be self-sufficient in agriculture. And that's a lot of what we're doing now. We're thinking about how can we get the coffee production up, how can we get . . . the mango production up . . . the avocados, and lots of other things."

In other words, the United States and other "agricultural powers," by providing Haiti with food aid, had tried to "free up" Haitian farmers to go work in U.S.-leased sweatshops—thereby ushering in "an industrial era." But this didn't work, and now Clinton, sensitive to the demands of Montas's focus groups, says he promotes agriculture. Yet Clinton, like Mulet, is still peddling factories, not fields. Playing a role similar to that of Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, the radical French commissioner sent to over-

see the rebellious French colony of Sainte-Domingue in 1792, Clinton has been careful to posture himself as a servant of Haitian authorities rather than as a proconsul.

On March 22 visit to Haiti, Clinton paid lip service to "revitalizing Haitian agriculture," but the centerpiece of his strategy is the Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity Through Partnership Encouragement Act of 2008, known as HOPE II, which will make it easier for U.S. companies to assemble and export products from Haiti tax free. Clinton claimed that in the medium term, HOPE II will generate 100,000 jobs for Haitians who will assemble clothing and electronics for the U.S. market. Thousands more would find jobs as guides, waiters, cleaners, and drivers when Haiti becomes a new tourist destination.

Is this "reconstruction" path really viable? In an April 3 article ("Rebuilding Haiti"—the Sweatshop Hoax," mrzine.org), longtime activist-journalist David L. Wilson handily debunked the "sweatshop path to development" myth by contrasting attitudes in the United States about immigrant labor, on the one hand, and third world development on the other. "Many of us believe that immigration reduces the number of jobs available for U.S. citizens, while the same people often swallow the idea that building new industrial parks in Port-au-Prince will magically create jobs for Haitians," Wilson explained. "The reality is exactly the opposite." He continued:

According to Bill Clinton, the United States provided Haiti with food aid in an effort to "free up" Haitian farmers to go work in U.S.-leased sweatshops—thereby ushering in "an industrial era."

If Haitian immigrants were stitching garments in New York or Los Angeles at jobs with standard wage rates, they and their dependents would be able to pay for decent housing and staples like food and clothing. This would stimulate job creation, and the new jobs would make up for the jobs the immigrants had taken—as in fact happened in the past when the United States produced its own apparel in union shops. But if the same Haitians work in assembly plants in Port-au-Prince or in the [free trade zone] near the Dominican border in Ouanaminthe, they have to accept wages at about one-twentieth the rate they would get in the United States. These workers are barely able to scrape by; their spending can do little to stimulate job creation either in Haiti or in the region as a whole.

As for agriculture, Clinton's rebuilding plan envisions 25,000 farmers growing mangoes for Coca-Cola to produce a new Odwalla brand drink. Thus, in official reconstruction plans, agriculture would integrate Haiti more deeply into the global capitalist economy. In contrast, many peasant and anti-neoliberal groups see agricultural self-sufficiency as a way to *disconnect* and insulate Haiti from predatory capitalist powers.

Meanwhile, after the State Department accused him of "severe corruption," Préval appears to have fallen into line. He seemed almost subdued as Bill and Hillary Clinton led the UN Donors Conference, where \$9.9 billion in international aid promises were gathered. The Haitian government's "Post-Disaster Needs Assessment," the meeting's reference document, requests \$12.2 billion for the next three years. Only \$41 million, or 0.3% of the total, would be earmarked for "agriculture and fishing." ■