

Haiti: is there a way out?

John Graham

Haiti has troubled and bewitched me. Its stygian complexity, bottomless poverty, unchanging corruption, gorgeous graphic arts, drums at night, and insoluble challenges became a chord which ran through my diplomatic and international careers.

There are many questions and few answers:

- Haiti: is there any hope?
- With its historical past, how did it get where it is today?
- Are there options?
- MINUSTAH: should that model be revisited and revised?
- Does the absence of appropriate international instrument leaves us off the hook?
- Assuming that the first step is the removal of the criminal gangs, how can that be achieved?

My first visit was in 1960. I traveled from “Ciudad Trujillo”, where I was posted, at the beginning of my diplomatic career and found a country in the grip of Papa Doc Duvalier and his Tonton Macoutes. The last was in 2010 when I visited shortly after a catastrophic earthquake, leading a small team on behalf of Jimmy Carter’s ‘Friends of the Inter-American Democratic Charter’.

The country has been in the news with a sequence of disasters: an earthquake in the Southwest corner, followed by a tropical storm, by the assassination of the president, the increasingly blatant eruption of criminal gangs and the kidnapping of sixteen Americans and one Canadian whose release to avoid execution is priced at one million US dollars each – incidentally promoting Haiti to ‘World Kidnapping Capital’. The disasters, both human and natural, are not exceptional: they have become the norm in this, the poorest and most tragic country of our hemisphere.

By any standard, Haiti is a failed state – top or bottom of every hemispheric index of social and health conditions - whichever denotes worst. It has the second highest record for coup d’etats in the hemisphere. Poverty, malnutrition and violence breed a grim family of horrors in any setting - not least for children, and Haiti is no exception: exploitation, stunted growth, mental illness, insecurity, violence, including sexual abuse, inadequate or non-existent access to clean water, education and health care.

Has it always been like this?

Surviving records indicate that conditions for the indigenous Taino people had been relatively peaceful until the arrival of Columbus and Spanish colonizers. The Taino were enslaved and soon wiped out by harsh working conditions and disease, whereupon they were replaced by sturdier slaves imported from Africa. Commercially, the new work force was a stunning success. For the French colonizers who seized the Western half of the Island of Hispaniola in 1697, Haiti became a bonanza. By the 1750’s with the returns on timber, sugar, cotton, cacao and indigo the value of Haitian exports exceeded that of the combined exports of the thirteen British colonies on the eastern seaboard of North America. Haiti had become “the Pearl of the Antilles”.

Exploitation of the slaves was the undoing of the French, the end of the bonanza, and a resounding humiliation for Napoleon. Slaves not only worked the fields, but were educated to take on administrative functions within the colony. Toussaint Louverture and other literate slaves with leadership skills led a revolt, which after five years of vicious carnage, abetted by tropical disease, crushed the French army and led to independence.

This was the first successful, major slave revolt since Spartacus 1900 years before. Haitians have little to cheer about these days, but can look with pride at the courage and skill of their predecessors' achievement of nationhood over a once invincible European power. By supplying much needed munitions, Haiti played a key role in Bolivar's defeat of Spain in Venezuela.

With its historical past, how could things go so wrong?

Twelve years of war had devastated a prosperous infrastructure. Sugar and all the industries along with the country's docks, mills and warehouses had been destroyed. Primary forests disappeared as the timber was taken for the French navy with the result that every tropical storm washes more soil into the sea. The price of victory was ruinous. To gain recognition Haiti was forced to pay crippling reparations to the French – payments that continued until 1947!

Still in the slavery business, the Americans were not enthusiastic about the world's first free black republic at their doorstep. Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner himself, imposed a commercial boycott on Haiti and diplomatic recognition by the United States was delayed 60 years. These were major impediments to development from which the country has never recovered – and Voodoo, a colourful but fatalistic theology, has not helped. The country deserves a better hand than it has been dealt.

In the course of my visit eleven years ago, I talked to political leaders and senior officers of MINUSTAH, the large UN team that was charged with imposing a foreign administered system of governance and order in a chaotic, gang invested vacuum and with preparing for a 'free' election. Order was the task of a UN military unit under a Brazilian general and police unit under a RCMP superintendent. Election results were widely contested and I wrote at the time that it was "highly probable that all major parties engaged in some degree of fraud." When a winner was finally declared it was Michel Martelly, a charismatic rap singer backed by followers with the proven capacity to close down the country. Port-au-Prince must be the most "barricadeable" city on Earth. With few exceptions the streets are narrow and strewn with rubble. Add a tire, light it, and if handy, throw in the carcass of an old car - and presto, you have stopped all traffic save a few enterprising motorcycles. This same, soon-to-be president, was also known to drop his trousers at the end of a concert and moon the audience.

I tell the story of MINUSTAH because at the time it seemed to offer a route out of chaos even as it appropriated a portion of national sovereignty. Tragically, its promise was never realized. Nepalese UN soldiers infected the country with cholera. Thousands died and a potential 'way out' was undermined.

Absorbing with difficulty the challenges faced by the UN and Haiti's friends, including Canada, I interviewed the astute, well-connected correspondent of Le Monde who had spent 30 years in the region, mostly in Haiti. Asked if there was a way out, he replied "pas de sortie". Eleven years on and so far, he is proven right.

Before Nepalese soldiers and cholera destroyed MINUSTAH and further poisoned the long, dismal reputation of international meddling in Haiti, MINUSTAH had been essentially on the right track. Should that model be revisited and revised?

Burnt by the MINUSTAH debacle, the UN (apart from humanitarian support) shows little interest. Nor is there any sign that the OAS is looking for a plan. MINUSTAH provides an excuse for dodging the challenge, but not a responsible justification.

But even if a new and practical plan is assembled, nothing constructive can be accomplished until the criminal gangs are suppressed. Many countries and international agencies provide humanitarian aid, but sadly in present Haitian circumstances this aid is essentially palliative. Progress on the deepening problems of violence, abject poverty, corruption and malnutrition is not possible while the gangs have free reign across the country – in short more despair and suffering, including rising mental as well as physical illness among the young.

All of which brings us back to square one and to the MINUSTAH model. Dealing with the gangs is a prerequisite – a task that would have to be performed by a well led, well-disciplined body of troops operating under the recognized authority of an international body. The obvious institution is the UN Security Council. But just as obviously, in the present demented climate a plan of this nature would be vetoed by one or more permanent members of the Security Council.

Are there other options?

It should be unthinkable that we would let Haiti self-destruct. This is an interconnected world, and without change in Haiti the closest neighbor, the Dominican Republic, will continue to be grievously affected, with ramifications extending to the entire neighborhood.

Another key element is the need for a political agreement, a consensus of internal Haitian actors, to move forward, without which there can be no break in the vicious circle.

In that context a credible dialogue and search for consensus emerged in August 2021 in what has been called the Montana Agreement. This group proposed plausible transition formulas to exit the crisis, and has become more credible with the establishment of links with an alliance of political parties through the “Protocole d’Entente Nationale (PEN)”, a coalition of some 70 political organizations and social groups. Montana could be a starting point.

The challenges are immense as are the risks of being drawn into a quagmire. Nevertheless, the absence of precedence and of an obvious international instrument should not let us off the hook? Serious planning is long overdue and must not lose sight of the first, and quiet likely the most difficult step – removal of the gangs.

On the surface it sounds anomalous, but Haiti’s only frontier is with, currently, the most dynamic economy in the hemisphere. With care and imagination that could be an advantage, not just an anomaly. Moreover, there is a sophisticated capacity both within Haiti and in the diaspora. These talents should be identified to facilitate their participation in implementation. This could engage a pilot plan involving both countries with the support of the international community. The project should be able to demonstrate that recovery from the damages of acute climate change is possible for two countries classified among the most vulnerable in the world. For success it would involve promoting the use of alternative energy sources to reduce the widespread use of charcoal, recovering land, with massive reforestation programs, recovering hydrographic basins, promoting the recovery of water, the creation of employment with the development of industrial free zones in border zones, while advancing sustainable agriculture and tourism. There is no shortage of tourist attractions in Haiti: beaches, mountains, colonial monuments and an extraordinary artistic capacity. With any luck, and luck is overdue, such a plan could instill confidence of both sides of the frontier, thereby attracting investors.

As a start it could be helpful if eminent and mutually compatible representatives from the Dominican Republic and Haiti, chaired by a senior international person, met together in camera with two or three experienced and senior veterans of MINUSTAH to develop a draft plan. Ideally the initial planning group should be kept as small as possible, enlarging as plans take shape to include international organizations and the Bretton Woods institutions.

Is this a way out? Luck is always a factor, but with luck, determination, patience, imagination, diplomacy and, of course compassion to keep everyone on track, it might work.