

Dominicans fear plot to merge them with Haiti

by Carlos Wesley

The restoration by U.S. bayonets of Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power in Haiti has not only ignited a low-intensity civil war in that Caribbean nation, but has also heightened the risk of warfare erupting between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, with which it shares the island of Hispaniola.

This correspondent just concluded a visit to the Dominican Republic, and everywhere in the country people expressed the fear that there is a plot to merge their country with Haiti. The fiercely nationalist Dominicans have always harbored some distrust toward Haiti, a country which staged several invasions against them in the last century, some very bloody. In fact, unlike the rest of Ibero-America, the Dominican Republic gained its independence not from Spain, but from Haiti.

But the expressions of hostility and fear toward Haitians evidenced this time go way beyond anything seen on previous visits. This prompts fears that the Bush-spawned campaign to restore Aristide has set in motion a process similar to what happened after the last time the United States invaded both Haiti, in 1915—and the Dominican Republic, the following year.

Then as now, the occupation forces disarmed the population, dissolved the armies, and U.S. officers recruited and trained a police force to keep public order. One of those U.S.-trained officers, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, later assumed command of the Dominican National Police and instituted a dynastic dictatorship that lasted 32 years, until 1961, when he was assassinated. Unfortunately, before that happened, in October 1937, Generalísimo Trujillo ordered a pogrom against all Haitians on Dominican territory. His police demonstrated their superior training by butchering 15,000-30,000 Haitian men, women, and children in just three days.

During his first sojourn as Haiti's President, Aristide unleashed a vituperative campaign against his eastern neighbor, accusing it of enslaving contracted Haitian sugar-cane workers. The campaign was backed by U.S. Rep. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.), who in 1991 convened hearings of his congressional subcommittee on the western hemisphere on the alleged enslavement. Dominican President Joaquín Balaguer responded by deporting thousands of Haitian undocumented workers in June 1991, and relations between the two countries grew more strained. Three months later Aristide was overthrown by Haiti's military, partly because they feared

his provocations would lead to war with the Dominicans.

Dominicans also recall that while he was out of power, Aristide kept up the attacks. He accused them of instigating the coup and breaking the embargo. Earlier this year Dominicans were forced to accept U.S. military observers in their country to monitor compliance with the embargo. To escape starvation, many Haitians, who were blocked from entering the United States, fled over the border. By some estimates as many as 1 million Haitians now live among the 7 million Dominicans.

On Aug. 16, when he was sworn in for an unprecedented seventh term, President Balaguer cited as proof of the merger plot, a contract "recently signed to refinance the public debt with private companies, mostly American, [in which] the following clause was inserted, and I quote: 'This contract will be fulfilled in the same terms, even in the case that the Dominican Republic enters into economic integration agreements with other countries, or in the case that the Dominican Republic fuses with another country in the Western Hemisphere.'" Balaguer added that in 1984 Great Britain shut down its embassy and its consulate in the capital Santo Domingo, forcing Dominicans to go to Port-au-Prince, Haiti for a visa. "This calls for profound reflection," he said, "because Great Britain is a country inhabited by pragmatic people, a country that prides itself in saying that there are only two races in the world: the British race, and the human race."

A Dominican official told a reporter that he was recently visited by a British officer "who wanted to sound me out as to how our military would respond to a proposal to fuse Haiti and the Dominican Republic." Balaguer defeated the U.S.-backed José Francisco Peña Gómez in this year's presidential elections mainly by convincing voters that Peña Gómez, if elected, would push for fusion. Claiming that Peña Gómez was defrauded, the United States blatantly intervened and forced the Dominicans to amend their Constitution overnight, slashing two years from Balaguer's term, banning him from seeking reelection, and calling another presidential election for 1996.

U.S. Ambassador Donna Jean Hrinak is openly attempting to shape the organization of those elections to insure Peña Gómez's victory. Peña Gómez is a member of the pro-drug-legalization bankers' lobby known as the Inter-American Dialogue, and a leader of the Socialist International. Many Dominicans believe that Peña Gómez, who is black, was born in Haiti.

Dominican officials claim that before she became the ambassador, Hrinak helped draft a plan to resettle millions of Haitians in their country. "Look, the U.S. is not going to spend the money Haiti really needs to rebuild," said a Dominican diplomat. "Haiti is not viable right now. It's completely deforested, it lacks arable land. The U.S. does not want the black Haitians going to Florida, so they are going to force them on us," he said. U.S. officials dismiss the Dominicans' fears as paranoid fantasies, stemming from racism.