

Crisis Group report on MINUSTAH is a whitewash of Haiti's ills, not a remedy

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First published in the August 23, 2012 edition of the weekly Haiti Liberté.

This slightly edited version published on CHAN website: www.canadahaitiaction.ca.

The international think-tank International Crisis Group has issued a lengthy report on the MINUSTAH military occupation regime in Haiti. Dated August 2, 2012, it runs 28 pages and its central recommendation is that the police/military regime should remain in Haiti for at least another five years. The report is titled, [Towards a Post-MINUSTAH Haiti: Making An Effective Transition](#).

This is the sixth report the ICG has produced on Haiti since the earthquake of January 2010. The group has displayed a capacity for frank and unbiased opinion. Its study on shelter and housing issued in June 2011, for example, blasted the government of Haiti and its international sponsors, saying they were utterly failing to meet the desperate housing needs of Haitians.

In this latest report, however, the group accepts without question the presence of MINUSTAH and its claim to have the best interests of Haitians at heart. The report amounts to a political whitewash that misrepresents the political circumstances that brought the mission to Haiti in 2004 and has kept it there ever since.

MINUSTAH's origins and achievements

As its name suggests, the ICG studies countries deemed to be destabilizing the international political order. It has 130 staff around the world. Its board of trustees is comprised of political, business and media figures, including Chairperson Thomas Pickering, Former U.S. Undersecretary of State and Ambassador to the U.N., and President Louise Arbour, a Canadian and Former Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

Describing MINUSTAH's origins, **Towards a Post-MINUSTAH Haiti** says on page one, "MINUSTAH's principal mandate was to establish a secure and stable environment within which Haitian constitutional and political processes could take place." Toward this end, the force has supported the Haitian National Police, maintained "rule of law and public safety," assisted in organizing elections, and the promotion and protection of human rights.

"MINUSTAH's contribution to generally improved security conditions is recognized both in Haiti and abroad," says the report. Further on, we read, "Political violence has significantly diminished" since 2004. The mission has assisted, "two national elections (2006 and 2010/11) which restored constitutional rule."

Disaster relief is listed as one of MINUSTAH's accomplishments, although the force has come under intense criticism in Haiti for its relatively feeble contribution to humanitarian relief. Most of its annual budget of some \$800 million is spent on policing and other forms of "security."

The report says the economic outlook for Haiti is "still encouraging," with six per cent growth foreseen for 2012. But it notes that the "Open for business" policy of the government of President Michel Martelly and Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe "will take time and requires a broad political consensus." The latter is patently absent.

A contrary view on Haiti's economy was [recently published \(in French\)](#) by Haitian economist Camille Chalmers. Titled, "The Economic Balance Sheet of Reconstruction," his article looks at the statistical trends in economic life in Haiti and concludes, "The figures show the impossibility of generating sustained growth" under the current economic and political regime in Haiti.

The real history

The International Crisis Group's skewed interpretation of the origin of MINUSTAH goes right back to its first report on the subject, in November 2004. There, we read, "In early 2004, after several years of fruitless diplomatic efforts to bridge political polarisation, Haiti was again convulsed by political violence. Pressured particularly by France and the U.S., Aristide left the country on 29 February."

This is a misleadingly polite description of a violent coup d'etat against the elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and all the other institutions of elected government of the country. An illegal and unconstitutional regime ("transitional government of technocrats" in ICG-speak) was installed following the overthrow. In the words of a [human rights study](#) by U.S. attorney Thomas Griffin in November 2004, that regime proceeded to unleash a "whirlwind of violence," fully backed by the military violence of the newly-created MINUSTAH, against those among Haiti's poor majority that attempted to resist the coup.

The United States, Canada and France provided vital military and political assistance to the coup and the installation of the illegal "technocrat" regime. These three nations then proposed to the UN Security Council the creation of MINUSTAH to disguise as international "peacekeeping" their military takeover of Haiti. MINUSTAH has been in the country ever since. Composed of police and soldiers from more than fifty countries in the world, the majority of its foot soldiers are from Latin America.

The ICG report praises MINUSTAH for its role in facilitating elections in Haiti. Yet, this is precisely one of the more egregious acts of the mission and of the large countries that stand behind it. They have financed and provided essential technical backing to elections that have excluded many of the vital political forces of Haiti, most notably the Fanmi Lavalas party founded by Aristide in 1996. That party won a decisive victory in the last truly free election in Haiti, in 2000. It has been excluded from every election since.

What's more, the elections of 2009, 2010 and 2011 for which the ICG has so much praise, scored the lowest participation rates in modern Haitian history and, indeed, in the modern history of the entire hemisphere.

The ICG report concedes some possible wrongdoing by MINUSTAH—notably its conduct in recklessly introducing the cholera bacteria via its Nepalese contingent in October 2010—but its overriding concern is for the reputation of the force. It cites an April 2012 report by UN independent expert on human rights, Michel Forst, that said further stalling on accepting responsibility for cholera’s introduction, “will do nothing to promote a good understanding of the activities of MINUSTAH.”

Echoing recent U.S., Canadian and European Union statements, the ICG says the next vital step for Haiti is the formation of a permanent electoral council to hold national and local elections. Most of Haiti’s parliamentarians and civil society have denounced this project, now championed by President Martelly. They call, instead, for a provisional electoral council, saying a permanent one would be arrived at by unconstitutional means. (It so happens a permanent council would also further entrench the politics of exclusion of Haiti’s poor majority from political life.)

The MINUSTAH record

It is difficult to square the ICG’s positive interpretation of the MINUSTAH’s record. It’s been more than eight years since the 2004 coup d’etat and more than two years since an international earthquake relief program that promised billions of dollars of aid to Haiti. Yet we read in the ICG report, “A strategy for the urban poor, including displaced persons in camps and post-earthquake informal communities, is still missing.”

The ICG also flags the “chronic failure (by successive Haitian governing regimes) to tackle poverty, inequalities and exclusion, which endanger most of the population...”

After expressing much concern over the cholera epidemic harming MINUSTAH’s reputation, the report says that accountability for cholera (including establishing clean water delivery systems) is now in the hands of the Pan American Health Organization. It reports the June 29 announcement at the OAS of a new, \$2 billion, international fund for clean water systems in Haiti. But like so many other promises, this one is long on words and will be short on action unless decisive international pressure is brought to bear.

The ICG makes no other specific mention of compensation to Haiti’s cholera victims, though it notes the legal action pending against MINUSTAH that has been launched on behalf of 5,000 victims by the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti.

While the ICG is happy to reach back into Haitian history to buttress its pro-MINUSTAH arguments, it conveniently ignores the voices that expressed concern for years about the threat of waterborne diseases to the Haitian people. Of note here is the 2008 report by Partners In Health that slammed, in particular, the coup-backing countries of 2004 for having blocked international loans sought by the second government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide to build potable water systems. (See [Woch nan soley: The denial of the right to water in Haiti.](#))

The ICG’s defense of MINUSTAH’s performance in establishing “security” it is not very convincing. The force’s first tasks, we read, were disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former soldiers of the Haitian army that was disbanded in 1995 (these were the core of the paramilitaries that

staged the 2004 coup); neutralization of urban gangs; curbs on crime; and a purge of the Haitian National Police. “None of these goals have been fully achieved,” we read.

Nor has police corruption been tackled. The report says 137 cases of police corruption or misconduct have not been investigated. The body in charge of such cases, the *Conseil supérieur de la police nationale*, has been chaired by none other than the country’s succession of prime ministers, that is, the products of the supposedly successful electoral outcomes produced by MINUSTAH.

The ICG report’s lengthy Part Three is devoted to MINUSTAH’s “exit strategy”, but on pages 18 and 19 we read a long litany of failings of the force and the Haitian government in laying the necessary groundwork. Rule of law, prison and judicial improvements, legal aid services, social services—progress on all is deemed absent or lacking.

Concerning MINUSTAH’s accountability, the ICG notes that MINUSTAH never created a “Claims Commission” that would allow Haitians to seek redress for alleged wrongdoings. Yet this was one of the conditions contained in the Status of Forces Agreement that MINUSTAH signed with Haiti’s de facto regime in 2004.

“There is no transition or exit strategy as yet (for MINUSTAH),” the ICG concludes. “The UN will need to remain in Haiti for a long time.”

Contradictions in the ICG report

The ICG report is full of other internal contradictions.

We read that Haiti is undergoing five transitions—from violence to reconciliation and peace; non-democratic culture to a democratic society; a failed to a modern national state; poverty and social injustice to a thriving and equitable economy; and from a country destroyed by an earthquake to one “not only being rebuilt but ideally transformed.” (page 4)

“A humanitarian imperative amid ongoing political instability, sporadic violence and recurring natural disasters continues to suggest the need for a strong international presence,” says the report.

Further, MINUSTAH must, “ensure that a phased withdrawal is linked to stronger institutions and progress toward lasting stability and development...” The goal in post-earthquake Haiti is, “support for the holding of elections to put in place a government and thus speed up reconstruction.”

All of this makes clear that in the minds of the report’s writers, at least, human development is required before “security” can be achieved. But the ICG then incongruously acknowledges that MINUSTAH spurns all responsibility to assist human development. The report says it is a “popular misconception” to think that MINUSTAH can shift from being a policing agency to development agency: “...MINUSTAH’s mandate does not include development as its priority...”

So the MINUSTAH formula, visibly endorsed by the ICG, turn in circles—policing, and no development; and no development, but policing.

Another contradiction is the report's strong praise for MINUSTAH's assistance to elections. It says such support is "essential" (page 6). But on page 22 we read that the heavy international hand in financing and organizing elections undermines the credibility of electoral outcomes.

"International financing of more than half of the costs of elections, continuing technical assistance to the CEP and MINUSTAH's logistics involvement made it easy for some Haitians, particularly those unhappy about Lavalas' absence from several elections, to criticise MINUSTAH and the international community for interference in the country's politics."

The ICG calls President Martelly's plan to revive the human rights-violating Haitian army "questionable." It goes on to assert that "many Haitians" support the plan. Its cited source for this assertion is one, unnamed Haitian government official. But Robert Muggah, former director of the Small Arms Survey, found overwhelming opposition to resurrecting the army during extensive surveys he and other researchers conducted last year, the results of which were [published in October 2011](#).

Finally, the report expresses a deeply biased assessment of the place of the Fanmi Lavalas party, which it calls one of three key "dangers" to "reconciliation" in Haiti. The other two dangers are "the Martelly presidency's Duvalierist imprints"(!) and "the reappearance of former members of a once brutal army" (whose resurrection is politely termed "questionable" earlier in the report).

Furthermore, actions by Lavalas-inspired political representatives in Haiti's Parliament are described as having "slowed government progress" in the first year of Martelly's presidency.

Conclusion

In 2011, a transnational group of doctors, scholars and activists published a comprehensive review of the deeply troubling, post-earthquake human rights record of MINUSTAH, entitled [MINUSTAH: Keeping the Peace or Conspiring Against It?](#) It was published under the auspices of the Health Roots Student Organization at the Harvard University School of Public Health. One of the authors of this present article was a co-author of that review.

The review was a response to the premise that if MINUSTAH leaves Haiti, the country will collapse into a spiral of violence from which it will never escape. Former head of MINUSTAH, Edmond Mulet, a Guatemalan, said the country would "just fall apart" if MINUSTAH were to leave. He described Haiti as "a society, community, a nation that has committed collective suicide" due its alleged political infighting.

The report noted there are higher levels of "insecurity" and violence in neighboring Caribbean states such as Jamaica, Trinidad and the Virgin Islands (and for that matter, in many U.S. cities) than in Haiti. That nullifies the principal justification for MINUSTAH.

In reality, much of Haiti's instability is the direct result of MINUSTAH's ongoing human rights abuses, said the authors. MINUSTAH's sparking of unrest is then used to justify its presence. The Harvard paper noted that "MINUSTAH's continued presence is justified by the levels of unrest, or potential for unrest, in Haiti... Since the earthquake, the only significant civil discord in the country has targeted MINUSTAH for introducing cholera or failing to respond to IDP camp conditions, or

expressed anger over fraudulent elections. MINUSTAH responded to these peaceful protests with violence, including tear gassing students and IDPs, assaulting international journalists, shooting at children and even killing peaceful protestors.”

Thanks to WikiLeaks revelations published last year in the weekly *Haiti Liberté* newspaper and *The Nation* magazine, [we have learned](#), in the words of former U.S. ambassador to Haiti Janet Sanderson that, “The UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti is an indispensable tool in realizing core USG [U.S. Government] policy interests in Haiti.”

MINUSTAH is, she said, “a financial and regional security bargain for the USG.”

Furthermore, MINUSTAH’s definition of developing an environment of political stability is highly exclusionary and, indeed, it contributes to the destabilization of the country. In that revealing cable previously cited (Oct 8, 2008), Sanderson said, “A premature departure of MINUSTAH would leave the [Haitian] government...vulnerable to...resurgent populist and anti-market economy political forces—reversing gains of the last two years”.

MINUSTAH has carried out a series of human rights violations resulting in a loss of Haitian sovereignty, stability, dignity and life. Its record of engaging in acts of extrajudicial murder, sexual assault, suppressing peaceful political protests, undermining democracy and introducing cholera into Haiti are more than enough grounds to revoke its mandate. Yet for geopolitical and economic reasons, this does not happen.

“At such a crucial point in Haiti’s history, and with years of failures, inaction, repression, and human rights violations documented, it is time that MINUSTAH respect the Haitian people’s wishes, and the wishes of many of its members’ citizens, and withdraw from Haiti,” the review says. “Arguments of greater instability cannot justify the current abuse and violence against Haitians.”

The Harvard-published review stands in sharp counterpoint to the ICG report and arrives at an opposite conclusion: “Just as concern of post-MINUSTAH instability cannot justify a single violation of a Haitian’s rights by an occupying force, no solution to Haiti’s problems can include foreign, armed military on its soil. If the UN and its members want to support Haiti, MINUSTAH’s nearly one billion USD yearly budget should be put toward sanitation, shelter, health, infrastructure, and education, not arms and soldiers that result in death, sexual assault, and the subversion of democracy.”

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This article and much more information on Haiti is available at:

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