

NCHR-Haiti Reviews Coup Regime's "First 45 Days": "Blame-the-Victims" Approach Betrays Democracy and Human Rights

By Richard Sanders, editor, *Press for Conversion!*

During the vicious onslaught of violence after the 2004 coup, NCHR-Haiti gave a glowing review of the new regime to their friends in the media.¹ Their joint media conference, with the Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organizations (POHDH) (see opposite page), is the closest these two CIDA-funded outfits ever came to documenting abuses during the early days of the dictatorship.

Although one might reasonably expect that prominent, Haitian human rights groups would strongly denounce the ousting of President Aristide's legitimate, Lavalas government and the coup-installed regime's undemocratic ascent to power, the NCHR-Haiti/POHDH report does nothing of the sort. There is not even a hint that the regime change was unconstitutional. By completely ignoring the illegitimacy of the *de facto* government, and by implying that a legal transition had taken place, these organizations' revealed their utter contempt for democracy.

But not only is there no mention of the fact that a savage assault on democracy had taken place, or that President Aristide had been kidnapped and exiled by U.S. Marines, their statement does not remark—even in passing—on the mass arrests and illegal imprisonment of thousands of Lavalas supporters. Neither does it mention their torture and abuse, the torching of their homes or the fact that thousands were being driven into hiding or exile. No mention is made of the thousands of elected Lavalas officials from all levels of government who were illegally fired. In fact, their meagre "report" does the exact opposite of exposing this nightmare by stating:

"Since the change in governments, NCHR-Haiti and POHDH have recorded a decrease in the number of human rights abuses and common

law violations being reported. This is not to say that violations in both senses are not still occurring, but rather that the cases are more isolated than before."²

If it is true that these two organizations "recorded a decrease" in the reports of abuse that they received, it was probably because they have little or no contact with Haiti's largely-impooverished masses that so strongly supported Aristide's government and the democracy it represented. (See details on p.8.)



"Aristide Resigns and Flies Into Exile"
—WASHINGTON POST, FRONT PAGE HEADLINE, MARCH 1 2004

Each of the six reports by independent U.S. human rights organizations that are reviewed in "The Canadian-backed Coup Regime's Reign of Terror," (see pp.3-19) states unequivocally that those who faced the brunt of the coup regime's terrifying onslaught of persecution were the poor supporters of the Lavalas Party. These abuses were committed by the coup regime's *de facto* police force and its paramilitary, death-squad allies. Remarkably, these abuses, and the total impunity of their perpetrators, were ignored in the NCHR-Haiti/POHDH report.

Perhaps thinking that the journalists who had assembled to hear their

disingenuous report might find such a whole-scale whitewash to be implausible, NCHR-Haiti and POHDH made one passing reference to "five young Lavalas men" who were "brutally murder[ed]" by police.³ This single case was the only mention of any serious abuse committed by the new regime.

Oddly, the first section of their report criticised the violently-deposed Aristide government. Although no evidence was presented to substantiate their claims, their report began by blaming Lavalas for a series of grave violations. They pointed the finger at Aristide's overthrown government for "summary executions, arbitrary arrests and detention, kidnapping, rape, theft and overall corruption."⁴ No such listing was cited in connection to the newly-emplaced, illegal regime. However, the scale and severity of abuse during the first 45 days of Latortue's regime, was far beyond what could reasonably be attributed to the whole decade of elected governments under Aristide and Preval.

This was typical of the slander doled out by NCHR-Haiti and POHDH during the pre-coup period. As Prof. Peter Hallwood, author of *Damming the Flood: Haiti and the Politics of Containment*, has said:

"groups like Human Rights Watch and the blatantly partisan

NCHR deprived the [Lavalas] government of much of its moral legitimacy, by portraying Aristide as a latter-day Duvalier surrounded by lawless gangs of 'bandits' or 'chimères.' To make such a portrayal convincing was no easy task, since during Aristide's second administration [2001-2004], reports from these same human rights groups suggest that perhaps 20 or 30 individuals may have been killed by people with some (often tenuous) connection to [Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party] FL—a number difficult to compare with the tens of thousands killed by the Duvaliers, to say nothing of the ad-

ditional four or five thousand killed during Aristide's exile in 1991-94."⁵

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the NCHR-Haiti/POHDH report reiterates its bizarre contention that "the number of reported cases of abuse has diminished" under the coup regime. They then turned their partisan focus back on exaggerating the Aristide government's alleged abuses by saying:

"what concerns human rights organizations such as POHDH and NCHR is what the current government intends to do about previously recorded abuses."⁶

NCHR-Haiti and POHDH also speak of the "former regime's practice of mobilizing practically all state institutions to serve its own interests and not those of the Haitian people" and say that this "resulted in the institu-

tionalization of impunity within the country and the systematic violation of fundamental human rights." In the report's second section, NCHR-Haiti and POHDH describe what they see as a major step forward after the coup, saying "the new regime does not exhibit the intention or the will to use key state institutions in the same manner as Haiti's previous leaders."⁷

Then, they lavish even more praise on the coup regime by saying:

"the new government is showing some interesting signs of dealing with the current situation. For example, the lists of individuals forbidden to leave the country as well as the list of senior level police officers removed from the force are encouraging examples of a will on the part of the government to combat impunity.

NCHR and POHDH hope that the government will not simply end with the removal of certain police officers, but will also continue with legal prosecution of those officers implicated in human rights violations."⁸

By thus concentrating the media's attention on alleged abuses of the deposed, Lavalas government, NCHR-Haiti and POHDH drew attention away from the hurricane of human rights abuses that were ravaging Haiti. Because many Lavalas officials and supporters were being hunted down and killed or imprisoned, they were desperately seeking safety abroad. Rather than criticising this witch hunt, the NCHR-Haiti/POHDH report praised the coup regime for forbidding these victims from escaping.

As for their concern about po-

POHDH: Another Recipient of CIDA Largesse

By Richard Sanders

The Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organizations (POHDH) is a coalition of eight groups,¹ including NCHR-Haiti. They are bound together by a fervent opposition to Aristide and by financial ties to the foreign governments behind Haiti's 2004 coup. During Latortue's regime, at least five POHDH members received CIDA funding totalling almost a quarter of a million dollars.² One member, the National Commission on Justice and Peace (JILAP), also belonged to the Group of 184 (G184). (See pp.33-43.)

In its 2004 human rights report, the U.S. State Department highlighted POHDH and CARLI (see pp.46-47) as "major human rights organizations"³ in Haiti. This view was certainly not shared by the Center for the Study of Human Rights, which did not even mention POHDH in its report for that year. (As for CARLI, the CSHR and other sources were harshly critical of this G184 member, which it called a "small, volunteer-based organization."⁴

The State Department, however, saw things differently. It cited POHDH in the context of Haitian groups that were "active and effective in monitoring human rights issues, meeting frequently with government officials."⁵ The State Department did not clarify which "government officials"

POHDH was in the habit of "meeting frequently" with. But, whether they were "officials" in the Haitian dictatorship or their U.S. counterparts seems more indicative of a subservience to power than a willingness to confront it. Showered praise upon POHDH, NCHR, the Ecumenical Center of Human Rights, CARLI and JILAP), the State Department said they "made frequent media appearances and published objective reports on violations."⁶

Although POHDH's objectivity is obviously suspect, its media access was undeniable. This was thanks in no small part to CIDA which bestowed \$300,000 for a media project run by POHDH and Haiti's Social Development and Communications Co. (SAKS).⁷

POHDH's friendly relations with the Canadian government were also evident during the pre-coup period. When Rights and Democracy—a multi-million dollar government agency—drew up its predictably anti-Aristide report praising the G184 as a neutral organization making a "highly useful"⁸ contribution to the crisis, POHDH was on the list⁹ of elitist, CIDA-funded Haitian organizations that were consulted.

But despite receiving high marks from the U.S. and Canadian governments, CUPE researcher Kevin Skerrett does not see POHDH as "substantially independent" of NCHR-Haiti. He notes that POHDH



"did not appear to publish material or reports and is essentially an appendage of NCHR. In fact, NCHR Director Espérance...also serves as POHDH treasurer, creating an interconnection that casts doubt on any claims of independence."¹⁰

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10. Kevin Skerrett, "Faking Genocide in Haiti," *ZNet*, June 23, 2005 <www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=55&ItemID=8142>

lice abuses during the Lavalas government, this is gravely ironic because the coup regime—with NCHR-Haiti’s careful assistance—was integrating hundreds of former military personnel (from the armed forces which Aristide had bravely disbanded in the mid-1990s) into the highest ranks of the new police force. (See p.16.) This, as all independent human rights reports stated, had alarmingly-harmful potential for the future of human rights in Haiti.

It is also astonishing that the NCHR-Haiti/POHDH report stated that “human rights organizations are optimistic about the arrests of individuals implicated in a series of violent acts—more significantly, high profile individuals such as Harold Sévère and former Minister of Interior, Jocelerme Privert.”⁹

As the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti explains, Sévère was a prominent member of Lavalas and the “former adjunct mayor of Port-au-Prince.” He was “arrested illegally (no warrant was produced) on March 14, 2004,”¹⁰ the day before the NCHR-Haiti/POHDH media conference. Sévère was among the thousands of political prisoners rounded up illegally in the first months of the coup regime. For the next nine months, until he was provisionally released in December 2004, Sévère was jailed on the basis of mere accusations. The charges in the trumped-up case against Sévère were finally dropped in April 2006,¹¹ after an election replaced the illegal, coup regime.

NCHR-Haiti and POHDH also said they were “optimistic” about the arrest of Aristide’s Minister of Interior, Jocelerme Privert. His arrest was carried out “illegally in the middle of the night on April 6, 2004,”¹² nine days before the NCHR-Haiti/POHDH media conference. As with Sévère, the investigation against Privert “did not reveal any evidence” against him. However, he was not released with Sévère in December, but spent an additional 19 months in jail until June 2006,¹³ for unsubstantiated involvement in the so-called “genocide,” that NCHR-Haiti fabricated with CIDA assistance. (See “Faking Genocide in Haiti,” pp.23-28.)

Although they praise the coup regime for arresting these “high profile” Lavalas politicians—who later

turned out to be totally innocent—NCHR-Haiti and POHDH criticized the regime for not *also* arresting Aristide’s prime minister, Yvon Neptune, whom they falsely accused of “participating in orchestrating”¹⁴ the faked “genocide.” On June 27, 2004, NCHR-Haiti and POHDH had their wish fulfilled when Neptune was illegally imprisoned. He was not released until July 28, 2006,¹⁵ when a judge found that there was wasn’t a shred of evidence against him.

The NCHR-Haiti/POHDH report also applauds the regime saying it was “pleased to see the nomination of a new State Prosecutor in Port-au-Prince. The State Prosecutor’s Office plays a key role in the establishment of the rule of law and is an essential tool in building democracy in Haiti.”¹⁶ This was the only mention of the word “democracy” in the NCHR-Haiti/POHDH report. Ironically, it was not invoked to critique the illegal regime’s power grab, but rather in a glowing reference to the dictatorship’s illegal appointment of a new prosecutor.

In a media release two days earlier, NCHR-Haiti described a “courtesy visit” they received from the new “prosecutor,” Jean Pierre Daniel Audain. In describing this cordial meeting, NCHR-Haiti said they were “extremely encouraged” by Audain’s “determination ...to restore strength in the law.” Most tellingly, they noted his commitment to:

“Taking public action against all those denounced by human rights organizations for their implication in acts of human rights violations.”¹⁷

This hinted at a nefarious deal by which the new regime began to illegally arrest Lavalas members based solely on accusations levelled by NCHR-Haiti. Such was the case with prominent political prisoners like musician “So Anne” Auguste whose unjust prosecution by Audain was the result of NCHR-Haiti’s baseless allegations. Audain later blocked a judge’s ruling which said Auguste should be released due to the lack of evidence. (See p.13.)

A report on “Human Rights Conditions in Haiti’s Prisons” also cites Audain for the same abuse of the “rule of law,” because he blocked the release of musician Bruno Jean Renald, when a judge found no evidence against him.¹⁸

The NCHR-Haiti/POHDH report

concludes by clarifying their views on “the difference between political persecution and the fight against impunity.” Rather than decrying the horrifying plight of thousands of Lavalas supporters, NCHR-Haiti and POHDH again revealed their blatant bias by implying that the coup regime was only arresting Lavalas supporters because they were *guilty* of human rights violations: “It is important not to consider the arrest and prosecution of members and/or supporters of the Lavalas party who have been implicated in human rights violations and/or infractions of the law as political persecution.”¹⁹

This “blame-the-victims” approach typifies the partisanship that runs like a cancer throughout all of NCHR-Haiti’s, CIDA-funded “human rights” work.

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