

Faking Genocide in Haiti:

Canada's Role in the Persecution of Prime Minister Yvon Neptune

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In the midst of the countless tragedies following from the 2004 coup in Haiti, one particular human rights case attracted more attention than any other—the case of Haiti's most famous political prisoner, the Prime Minister of Aristide's democratically elected government, Yvon Neptune.

Neptune's case is particularly important because it reveals so much about the political and organizational dynamics behind the coup process in Haiti. And, it directly exposed a key role played by the Canadian government (through the Canadian International Development Agency—CIDA) in funding an extremely partisan “human rights” organization in Haiti called the National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR-Haiti).

Within days of the coup, the NCHR accused Prime Minister Yvon Neptune of responsibility for what they said was a major massacre of 50 people. In fact, according to NCHR, this “cruel, horrific, savage and barbaric” “crime against humanity” was a “genocide.”¹ The NCHR enjoyed significant financial support from the Canadian and U.S. governments. A press release from the Canadian Embassy in Haiti distributed after the coup announced that a Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) grant of \$100,000 for NCHR had been allocated for their “human rights” work.²

The particular episode of violence and the political killings for which Neptune was blamed took place in the city of St. Marc on February 11, 2004. The incident occurred during the three-week “death squad rebellion” that began February 5 in Gonaives and spread through Haiti's north. The rebel attacks launched during this “rebellion” culminated in the coup of February 29.

Two days after the massacre, a delegation that included members of the Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organisations (POHDH) and the NCHR, visited St. Marc and denounced the



Photo: Pablo Aneli, AP

violence. The NCHR issued a statement saying:

“The crimes committed in Saint-Marc...are distinguished by their cruel, horrific, savage and barbaric nature and constitute the worst of the worst committed by the Lavalas regime. The killers had at their disposition powerful resources from the State and now are benefiting from official impunity. NCHR considers these acts as genocide, or better yet, as a crime against humanity.

“The genocide...was carried out less than 48 hours after a visit from Prime Minister Yvon Neptune to Saint-Marc, during which he reiterated his government's desire to re-establish ‘order’ in the city and then gave instructions for a brutal intervention against the forces of the opposition.”³

The claim that Neptune gave instructions for a “brutal intervention” is not supported by any evidence, but it forms the first allegation of Neptune's responsibility. There were many international journalists on hand at Neptune's media conference in St. Marc on February 9. While they mentioned his appeal for calm and the restoration of order, not a single reporter said anything about “instructions for a brutal intervention.” In fact, the Associated

Press (AP)—not known for sympathetic reporting on President Aristide's government—said Neptune “called on Haitians to help restore calm.”⁴

On March 2, NCHR issued a media release claiming that they had investigated the events in St. Marc and were accompanied by “national and international press.” The NCHR, however, does not name any of the journalists or news agencies that supposedly accompanied them, nor do they cite any media reports that might corroborate their claims. In fact, there are no reports of this delegation in the *New York Times*, the *Miami Herald*, *AP*, *Reuters* or the *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), which were then among the most active international media outlets in Haiti. Given the gravity of the NCHR's claims, it would be very surprising if reporters accompanying the NCHR were to then choose not to report the discovery of evidence proving such a large number of killings. This alone makes the NCHR's claim difficult to accept.

In a subsequent media release on March 30, in which the NCHR called for a “model trial” to prosecute the government culprits behind the St. Marc “genocide,” it announced the formation of an organization to advocate for the victims and its provision of legal support to this group.⁵ This NCHR sup-

port was later shown to be Canadian-funded. Then, after asserting their “complete neutrality,” the NCHR claimed that:

“The la Scierie genocide constitutes the largest massacre perpetrated against the civilian population by the Lavalas regime. Numerous violent acts have been revealed—acts that were evidently carried out with the complicity of high-ranking officials of the State.”⁶

The NCHR issued yet another media release, on April 15, which directly challenged the coup-installed regime to arrest Haiti’s constitutional Prime Minister, Yvon Neptune:

“POHDH and NCHR question the reasoning behind the arrest of [Aristide’s Interior Minister Jocelerme] Privert only and not former Prime Minister, Yvon Neptune, when the evidence against Neptune concerning his participating in orchestrating the La Scierie (St. Marc) Massacre of 11 February 2004 is more substantial.”⁷

Was the number of people killed in St. Marc really great enough to earn the potent and emotionally-loaded label “genocide”? Second, whatever the actual scale of the violence, was any evidence, “substantial” or otherwise, presented to suggest Neptune’s responsibility? Let us examine these questions using a review of widely-distributed international media coverage.

How many people were killed in St. Marc?

There is no doubt that violent clashes occurred in St. Marc on February 11, and during the days and weeks prior to and subsequent to that date. But was it a “genocide,” a “massacre”, or “better yet, a crime against humanity,” as NCHR claimed?

Two armed groups had been operating in St. Marc for some time. One of them, Balé Wouzé, supported the Lavalas Party and defended the elected government. Another group, Rassemblement des militants conséquents de Saint-Marc (RAMICOS), opposed the government and President Aristide in particular. On February 11, the AFP reported that battles between the two groups left two dead on the previous evening.⁸

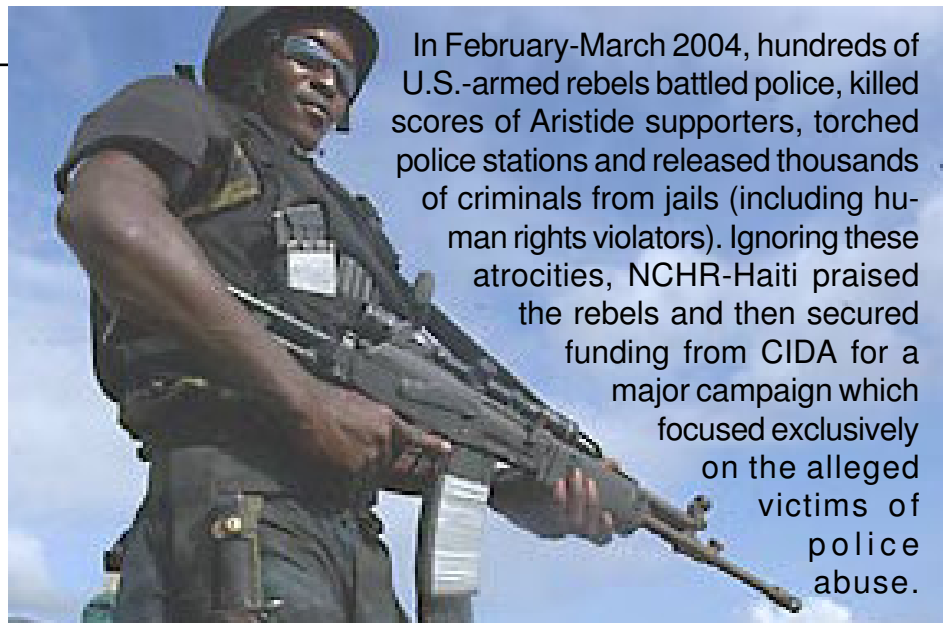


Photo: Walter Astrada, AP

In February-March 2004, hundreds of U.S.-armed rebels battled police, killed scores of Aristide supporters, torched police stations and released thousands of criminals from jails (including human rights violators). Ignoring these atrocities, NCHR-Haiti praised the rebels and then secured funding from CIDA for a major campaign which focused exclusively on the alleged victims of police abuse.

AP said that after a police raid (accompanied by Balé Wouzé members) on a RAMICOS headquarters, reporters saw the “charred remains of one person and the bodies of three people apparently shot in the back.”⁹

An AFP report said two government opponents were killed and reporters saw the bodies of three young men who had been shot, for a total of 5 dead.¹⁰

Another AFP report cited a police spokesman who

“confirmed that a police operation had been carried out in the city, but said the fatalities were the result of fighting between the anti- and pro-Aristide groups, the RAMICOS and the Balai Rouzé (sic).”¹¹

When the Haitian newspaper, *Le Nouvelliste*, reported on the St. Marc incident, it said that “at least three young people were shot.”¹²

So, the international media *did* report on a violent exchange involving Haitian police, militant members of Balé Wouzé and RAMICOS. However, in all the coverage from the *Miami Herald*, AFP, AP and *NYT*, the largest number said to have been killed was five.

The Context: An armed rebellion

Some context for the St. Marc events is useful. The February-11 police raid on the RAMICOS stronghold followed the eruption of an armed “rebellion” that began in nearby Gonaïves on February 5. The Gonaïves “rebels” were joined by RAMICOS members in St. Marc, on February 7, and other armed, anti-gov-

ernment groups elsewhere. All were intent on violently challenging the constitutional authority of Aristide’s elected government.

In St. Marc, the police station was attacked and burned out. When police officers fled the city, they left control of the area temporarily in the hands of RAMICOS. By February 9, police reinforcements succeeded in re-taking St. Marc leaving several dead in various gun battles.

Miami Herald reporter Michael Ottey referred on February 15 to a “calculated plan concocted by armed gangs opposed to President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to ‘cleanse’ this impoverished land of his supporters.”¹³ This plan following a campaign to terrorize the general population by “first going after members and sympathizers of Lavalas and torching just about anything they owned. They then went after police and government officials.”¹⁴

In the context of this open and violent rebellion, police attempts to end the rebel’s “reign of terror” would seem to be the minimum response from a government responsible for protecting the population and defending the rule of law. This was especially true given the fact that the “rebellion” was disrupting the flow of international food aid upon which much of the population was dependent for survival. Thousands of lives were threatened, as aid agencies urgently pointed out.¹⁵

Media sources also provide ample evidence that the violence attributable to RAMICOS was especially

brutal. Similarly, the attacks committed by paramilitary rebels in other Haitian cities was horrifying. However, very few of the rebels' many serious human rights violations against the Lavalas government's police, or against civilian defenders of democratically elected Lavalas government, were ever mentioned in NCHR media releases.

Completely omitted are any NCHR references to RAMICOS burning down a health clinic or their prior torching of two radio stations. These are suspicious omissions for a supposedly non-partisan human rights organization, like NCHR. These incidents were however reported by various international media sources.

The NCHR's March 2 press release focused exclusively on condemning violence purportedly carried out by the Haitian police and by supporters of Haiti's besieged government.¹⁶

On April 9, 2005, some 13 months after NCHR first issued its dramatic claims of "genocide" in St. Marc, former NCHR Director Anne Fuller, now a consultant for Human Rights Watch, published a report on the events of February 11.¹⁷ Indicating that she had carried out an investigation of several days length at the end of March 2004, Fuller concluded, somewhat tentatively, "I believe at least 10 people and perhaps 12" were killed in St. Marc.

However, Fuller adds that "some but not all were RAMICOS members" thereby acknowledging that some of the dead were either members of Balé Wouzé or, in fact, other victims of armed RAMICOS partisans, or uninvolved bystanders. Fuller admits frankly that she has "no information" regarding who might have "ordered" violence in St. Marc. She concluded by urging NCHR to issue a report to support their claims. The NCHR has still not filed any such report.

While several killings described by witnesses suggest illegality and even brutality, it is equally true that some of those killed may have died in battles with police who were attempting to arrest the heavily-armed rebels who were contributing to the insurrection that eventually resulted in a successful coup against the constitutional government of Haiti.

Following the coup, RAMICOS

was described as a "powerful presence" in St. Marc. For example, during the Canadian-backed, coup-installed regime, one member of RAMICOS, Thompson Charlienor, gained the (unelected) position of "Deputy Mayor" of St. Marc,¹⁸ and led a "victims advocacy" group—likely the same group supported financially by Canada through NCHR.

No evidence has ever been presented by NCHR to support their repeated claims that 50 individuals were killed on February 11 in St. Marc. Furthermore, there is no evidence of an illegitimate exercise of force by Haitian police. Given the apparent inclination among most western journalists to report what were often merely allegations of violence attributed to Aristide's government, their police and supporters of the Lavalas party, it seems extremely unlikely that the kind of major massacre claimed by NCHR was missed or not reported. This leaves only the statements of one organization—one which has failed to provide any supporting evidence. When reporters have asked the NCHR's Director, Pierre Espérance, about the discrepancy between international media reports and his claim that 50 were killed in St. Marc, he has replied that the other bodies were "eaten by dogs."¹⁹

It is also revealing that none of the above-cited sources—the international media, NCHR or Anne Fuller—appear to have interviewed any representatives of the pro-Lavalas group Balé Wouzé. However, another Haitian human rights organization—the Comité de Défense des Droits du Peuple Haïtiens (CDPH)—did publish a detailed 67-page report that included among its sources NCHR media releases, international media reports and a written statement by representatives of Balé Wouzé. The Balé Wouzé statement is roughly consistent with the international media reports in terms of the numbers killed, and adds other details which completely contradict NCHR's version of events:

"At roughly 11 o'clock in the morning, [RAMICOS] broke into the health clinic of Dr. Ivetho Mayette in order to abduct the victim [Balé Wouzé member Edrice Thlusemé, who was shot the day before by members

of RAMICOS] who was receiving treatment. They demanded of the doctor that he be turned over, and upon his refusal to do so, they torched the clinic. They were then caught in *flagrante delicto* [i.e. committing a crime] by a police patrol; to defend themselves, they opened fire on the police while fleeing in the direction of their base in Scierie [St. Marc]. The police followed them.... In the exchange of fire with police, five individuals were killed according to inhabitants of the region. At no moment did members of Balé Wouzé gain access to Scierie, nor was there any massacre."²⁰

The Balé Wouzé statement also includes a very disturbing report of vicious reprisals against their group for three days after the February 29 coup that removed President Aristide. Nineteen individuals are listed by name as having been executed (shot) by RAMICOS members.

Among those killed, several were subjected to atrocities: Jeanty Renonce was dragged behind a Toyota pick-up through the streets of St. Marc before being burned in front of the office of Balé Wouzé. Dieulifaite Fleury was hung from a mango tree and then burned. Mitilien Somoza was shot and then mutilated on March 2, 2004.²¹

These reports are essentially claims of a different massacre altogether. Although they should not be accepted at face value, they should be investigated and evaluated. However, NCHR never mentioned these reports, let alone investigated them. Nor, of course, was NCHR involved in organizing or financing "victim's organizations" or "model trials" related to these killings. In turn, there is apparently no recognition by the international media or by NCHR's funders at CIDA that alternative and much more detailed reports of the St. Marc episode even exist.

Is there any evidence of Neptune's Guilt?

Following the coup, NCHR Director Pierre Espérance repeatedly demanded that Prime Minister Yvon Neptune be prosecuted for his "implication" in the so called "genocide" of St. Marc. When a warrant was issued for the ar-



Guy Philippe,
rebel commander
of the
"Front Résistance
pour la
Libération Nationale"

On March 2, 2004, NCHR-Haiti issued a media release stating: "The NCHR takes this opportunity to congratulate the members of the Front Résistance pour la Libération Nationale...."

Source: Cited in an "Open letter to the Minister of Justice and Public Safety," October 31, 2006. <www.ijdh.org/pdf/politicalprisoner10-31-06.pdf>

rest of Neptune in June 2004, the Canadian-backed, Haiti's coup-installed "interim government" referred specifically to NCHR's allegations in their rationale for his arrest.

As awareness of Neptune's situation grew, particularly since the launch of his second hunger strike on April 17, 2005, various international agencies condemned his mistreatment. Even the UN recognized that NCHR had distorted this story. Following an April 2005 investigation into the violence in St. Marc, UN Human Rights Expert on Haiti, Louis Joinet, "dismissed accounts of a massacre"²² and described instead a series of killings in "confrontations" between two armed groups (Balé Wouzé and RAMICOS), with casualties on both sides. Joinet's conclusions were echoed by Thierry Fagart, chief of the UN Mission's Human Rights division, who also said

"since the beginning of the procedure until today, the fundamental rights, according to national and international standards, have not been respected in the case of Mr. Neptune and Privert."²³

But not only did the UN's two top officials dealing with human rights in Haiti completely repudiate NCHR's most significant and reported claims, NCHR-Haiti's parent organization (NCHR-New York) actually issued a

media release in early March 2005 to distance itself from its renegade offspring. The New York-based NCHR Executive Director pointed out that NCHR-Haiti Director Espérance had issued a statement

"critical of the decision by UN and Haitian authorities in Haiti to provide emergency medical treatment to former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune.... Neither Mr. Espérance, nor any member of the staff of NCHR-Haiti, speak for or on behalf of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights, its board or its staff."²⁴

For many observers, this statement, along with those of Joinet and Fagart, have completely discredited NCHR-Haiti. To evade this destroyed reputation NCHR-Haiti changed its name to the National Network for the Defense of Human Rights.²⁵ However, this only contributed to its image as a desperate, failed organization.

In the process of attempting to establish a case using only allegation and innuendo, the NCHR grotesquely exaggerated one particular incident of violence with a distinctly partisan and political objective—the persecution of one of the Lavalas Party's most prominent figures. These conclusions raise a different question, that of the ultimate origins of the real motivations and agenda of NCHR.

Canadian Government Funding for NCHR

NCHR is a favoured beneficiary of Canadian government funding agencies and aid organizations. By all accounts, it appears as though both the Canadian and U.S. governments—through CIDA and the U.S. Agency for International Development—have funded NCHR for many years. In fact, within weeks of the allegations launched by NCHR against Prime Minister Neptune, the Canadian Embassy in Haiti announced that \$100,000 would be allocated to that group.²⁶ Coinciding with this CIDA-funding announcement, were NCHR media releases that challenged the post-coup regime for not arresting Neptune for complicity in the St. Marc deaths. Although the NCHR claimed that the evidence of his complicity was "substantial," they never actually produced any evidence at all.²⁷

However, the NCHR's partisan, advocacy efforts did have a substantial impact on some Canadian institutions and NGOs. Rights and Democracy, an otherwise credible (federally-funded) organization previously led by respected, former politicians such as Warren Allmand and Ed Broadbent, appears to have uncritically accepted what groups such as NCHR report.²⁸

Likewise, during the months leading up to the 2004 coup, the Quebec-based L'Association Québécoise des Organismes de Coopération Internationale (AQOCI)—a network of 53 international aid groups—became so swept up in the anti-Aristide and anti-government hysteria generated by groups such as NCHR that they issued a press release on December 15, 2003, urging the Canadian government to withdraw all support from the "Lavalas party regime," and to denounce the Aristide government for being "riddled with abuses of human rights."²⁹

Like NCHR, both Rights and Democracy and AQOCI (and most of AQOCI's constituent groups) receive very large portions of their operating budgets from CIDA. It is perhaps not surprising then that they would uncritically accept the word of a CIDA-funded, sister group in Haiti. However, Canadian citizens, journalists and even elected leaders are not generally informed of these financial connections,

nor are they publicly reported.³⁰

Perhaps the most extreme case of a Canadian organization adopting a fiercely partisan anti-Lavalas/anti-Aristide position is an informal coalition of development agencies called Concertation Pour Haiti (CPH), based in Montréal. In February 2004, just before the coup, CPH issued an 8-page document with a litany of accusations against the Aristide government, many similar in nature to those of NCHR and, in some cases, NCHR is cited explicitly. CPH also endorsed the political opposition's proposal for "resolving" the crisis in Haiti: Establishing a "transition" government presided over by a member of the Supreme Court and establishing a non-constitutional Conseil des Sages. This is precisely what took place following the February 29 coup.³¹

The politicization of CIDA funding to Haiti reached a point of some absurdity during the illegal, post-coup regime. As a major supporter of Haiti's 2004 coup d'état and the "interim government" that followed, the Government of Canada used "international aid" money to pay the salary of CIDA employees working as top officials in the new, Canadian-backed Haitian government. Such was the case of Philippe Vixamar, who worked as the Deputy Minister of Justice for Haiti's coup-installed regime. The human rights report written by Thomas Griffin for an investigation by the University of Miami's Law School, described a peculiar interview conducted with Vixamar, during which he disputes all evidence of grave human rights abuses by the Haitian police.³² (See "CIDA Bankrolled Coup's Deputy Minister of 'Justice,'" pp.29-31.)

In this context, it is hardly surprising that NCHR has had very little to say about the many serious human rights violations recorded by Griffin and others. Material published by AP, Reuters, the UK *Observer*, *Toronto Star*, *Miami Herald*, Amnesty International, the International Crisis Group and others, have shown definitively that the Haitian police (during the Canadian-backed, coup-installed regime) conducted violent raids on poor urban

neighbourhoods where Lavalas support is most concentrated.³³ However, very few of these attacks were ever mentioned in NCHR's media releases.

Even when NCHR did acknowledge the summary executions of Lavalas supporters by Haitian police, it was claimed that there was not enough information to confirm police responsibility.³⁴ For instance, in an October 28, 2004, media release the NCHR quite calmly reported that 15 young people (ten boys and five girls) had been tortured and executed in an area where a "commando unit" of "masked [police] officers" had been seen storming the home in which 13 of these youths had just been meeting. Nonetheless, NCHR refers to these killings—which appear to constitute a real "massacre"—with some skepticism,

On March 5, CIDA signed a contract giving NCHR-Haiti about \$100,000 to create a major campaign that amounted to framing Lavalas leaders, including Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, for a "genocide" that never happened.



President Aristide and Prime Minister Neptune at Haiti's Independence Day ceremony in 2003.

noting that the act was "attributed" to Haitian police. This contrasts sharply with the NCHR's reports about the killings in St. Marc, where they quickly concluded that a barbaric act of "genocide" had been ordered by Yvon Neptune himself. In the case of the torture and killing of 15 youths, the NCHR collected the names of a few victims and asked the "interim government" for a "commission of inquiry." However, once this call was predictably ignored by the coup-installed regime, the victims were promptly forgotten by NCHR.

Even more disturbing are cases where NCHR completely ignored executions committed by police during the

coup-installed regime. For example, on January 14, 2005, a young journalist and law student, Abdias Jean, was executed by Haitian police after he witnessed them killing people. Reported by *Reuters'* Haiti correspondent Joseph Delva, and John Maxwell of the *Jamaica Observer*, Jean's execution was later condemned by the Association of Haitian Journalists, the International News Safety Institute, the Inter American Press Association, and eventually even by UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura. In what was, perhaps, its most glaringly-obvious partisan omission, the NCHR did not even mention this especially-ugly, high-profile police killing.³⁵

By all accounts, these stark problems with the integrity of NCHR appear to pose no problems for officials at CIDA or with any others in the Government of Canada. In fact, it appears that NCHR continued to gain additional funding from Canadian taxpayers as the importance of "human rights" reporting increased after the coup and during the lead up to the elections overseen by the coup-installed regime in early 2006.

While during the years leading up to the anti-Aristide coup, the NCHR's activities focused almost exclusively on what they claimed were victims of human rights abuses committed by members of Haiti's government and police, their orientation shifted abruptly after the coup. Following the coup, NCHR's criticism of attacks by Haitian police officers

became muted. And, when the NCHR did report on these deaths, they were qualified with suggestions that when innocent civilians were killed by police, it was described as "collateral damage."

Prior to the coup, NCHR had a consistent practice of directly linking police abuses to the government—particularly when civilians were said to have been "targeted." Then during the coup-installed regime, NCHR referred to such police killings as "collateral damage," which legitimized them as unintended "accidents" during police operations. A search of NCHR's website shows not a single use of the term "collateral damage" prior to the 2004 coup.

The evidence reviewed above confirms the conclusions reached by an increasing number of independent observers. There was no genocide in St. Marc, and not even a “massacre,” but rather a series of violent confrontations resulting in a number of deaths—possibly as many as 10 or 12. And, these victims were on both “sides” of the conflict that led to the February 29 coup. Our review strongly suggests that NCHR’s confident allegation—that Prime Minister Neptune was implicated in these killings—was entirely political in nature, and remains completely unsupported by any evidence.

Finally, the issues raised by this episode also suggest that a serious review of CIDA’s human-rights programming is in order. We need to ensure that Canadian-funded and supported organizations that are ostensibly working in defence of human rights and democracy are not being manipulated into serving the very narrow foreign policy or trade policy interests of the Canadian government. Clearly, Canadians do not want their government to join the list of countries best known for manipulating a rhetoric of human rights and democracy while working toward self-serving political and economic objectives that are in fact hostile to both.

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