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Roger Annis
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## **OAS Diplomat Delivers Searing Indictment of Haiti Occupation Regime**

*Of all the commentaries and interviews coinciding with the anniversary of Haiti's earthquake, none are likely to exceed in significance the interview granted by OAS Representative to Haiti, Ricardo Seitenfus, to the Swiss daily Le Temps on December 20.*

*The critique he delivered to the newspaper is especially significant for Latin America and the Caribbean because Seitenfus is Brazilian. Sensitivity is running high in the region over the evident failure of the international relief effort led by the big powers – the United States, Canada and Europe – whose interventionist policies had already done so much harm to Haiti before this latest catastrophe.*

*Brazil is the leading country of the UN Security Council's military occupation force known as MINUSTAH. Eight other countries of Latin America provide foot soldiers to the force, including Chile, Argentina and Bolivia. Brazil has also supplied important humanitarian assistance, but Cuba and Venezuela have distinguished themselves by providing massive effective aid that is unsullied by participation in an imperialist-initiated military occupation force.*

**By Roger Annis**

*(This is a slightly revised version of the original first published on Upside Down World, December 28, 2010.)*

As the one-year anniversary of Haiti's earthquake approaches, a brutally frank account of the plight of its people has been delivered by a highly placed foreign diplomat. Ricardo Seitenfus, the representative to Haiti of the Organization of American States, delivered a hard-hitting assessment of the foreign role in that country in an interview published in the December 20 edition of the Swiss daily *Le Temps*.<sup>[1]</sup>

The interview also appeared in the right-wing, Haitian daily, *Le Nouvelliste*. For his words, the diplomat was immediately recalled from his posting.

Seitenfus is Brazilian and a graduate of the Institute of Advanced International Studies in Geneva. The truths he pronounced in the now-famous interview are not unique; they have been voiced by many Haitians and their allies abroad. But to hear them uttered by someone of his standing is a sign of the unraveling of a miserably-failed foreign military and political occupation force in Haiti.

### **The Failings in Haiti**

Seitenfus questions the legitimacy and utility of the UN Security Council occupation force known as MINUSTAH. It numbers 13,000 military and police (an increase of 50 per cent since the earthquake) along with several thousand political officers. "Haiti is not an international threat," he says. "We are not experiencing a civil war."

He is asked, is it a counter-productive presence? His answer is, yes. The diplomat traces the 200-year history of foreign subjugation of Haiti. He draws a line of continuity to the present. "The world has never known how to treat Haiti, so it has ignored it."

He says the country has lived a "low intensity war" since 1986, the year of the overthrow of the Duvalier tyranny. "We want to turn Haiti into a capitalist country, an export platform for the U.S. market, it's absurd. Haiti must return to what it is, that is to say, a predominantly agricultural country still fundamentally imbued with customary law."

Noting the large number of Haiti's people living abroad (a high-sounding estimate of four million), Seitenfus says he does not pine for a return to a quaint rural past as a solution to Haiti's present crisis. But he believes that the foreign intervention runs contrary to the country's interests and needs. "The problem is socio-economic. When the level of unemployment is 80%, it is unacceptable to deploy a stabilization mission. There is nothing to stabilize and everything to build."

When the interview turns to questions of aid and earthquake relief, Seitenfus drops a bomb in declaring, "If there is proof of the failure of international aid, it is Haiti." Charity and aid to Haiti have enfeebled the Haitian state.

"Emergency aid is effective. But when it becomes structural, when it replaces the state in all its duties, collective responsibilities in society end up abandoned."

His words for the world of charities and NGOs are harsh. Haiti, he says, has become a "Mecca" for them, a "laboratory," a "go-to" destination, and worse – a stage in their professional development. For these NGOs to exist, he says, Haiti must fail.

"Haiti is ground zero of humanity's tragedy and the failings of its international solidarity."

### **A disastrous election**

The dismissed ambassador does not comment on the electoral exercise that was staged in Haiti on November 28. It's not difficult to imagine that, like many others in the world, he was aghast at what took place. By any measure, the vote was a violation of the democratic will of the Haitian people:

- It was financed by foreign powers, to the tune of at least \$30 million.
- The country's most representative political party, the Fanmi Lavalas of exiled, former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was ruled off the ballot.

- The list of registered voters that was used by the country's electoral commission predated the January 12 earthquake and therefore contained the names of the more than 250,000 people no longer alive.
- It was difficult, if not impossible, for voters to register and cast their ballots. In the last genuinely democratic election in Haiti, the year 2000, there were some 12,000 polling stations. This time, there were less than a thousand.
- Widespread violations and irregularities at polling stations on election day were observed and reported.

But none of this has slowed the international powers in Haiti from pressing ahead to a second-round presidential vote in what many Haitians term not an election but a "selection." Haitians will end up with a foregone result – a "president" whose extreme-right political leanings will be at odds with the political sentiments of the vast majority of the people but perfectly suited to the interests of the foreign powers.

### **The cholera tragedy**

Perhaps the most tragic of the calamities that have befallen Haiti is the introduction of cholera into the country by the very occupation force criticized so heavily by Ricardo Seitenfus. The disease has taken a heavy toll with more than 2,000 killed and tens of thousands fallen ill. Its economic consequences, especially on Haiti's vital agriculture, will be costly and long lasting.[2]

After weeks of denying any responsibility for introducing cholera, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon announced on December 15 that the organization would conduct an inquiry into its possible role. French epidemiologist Renaud Piarroux says "no other hypothesis" could explain his findings that cases of the diarrheal disease first appeared near a Nepalese-staffed MINUSTAH base in central Haiti.[3]

The inquiry will need to look not only at where and how cholera was introduced, but also what measures, if any, were taken by the UN to prevent its occurrence. For as *New Scientist* writer Debora MacKenzie wrote in the December 7 issue of the prestigious weekly magazine:

"UN peacekeepers around the world are largely supplied by poor countries, and of the top 15 contributors, which supply 71 per cent of UN troops, 12 harbor cholera. If Haiti's cholera did indeed come from Nepal, it was a foreseeable accident. More caution is called for."[4]

MacKenzie's column slammed the UN for stalling an inquiry and the World Health Organization for stating that finding the source of the disease was "not important."

Another startling element to the cholera saga was brought to light by Joia Mukherjee, Executive Director of Partners In Health, in an article written shortly after the outbreak. She reminded the world that among the victims of the aid embargo against the government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide instituted by the U.S., Europe and Canada following the 2000 election were water treatment facilities in the very region where cholera first appeared.[5]

### **A challenge to Latin America**

Seitenfus' views reflect the concerns of growing numbers of people in Latin American and the Caribbean over Haiti's treatment. These concerns were underscored when CARICOM decided to lend legitimacy to the November 28 election by sending a delegation of monitors and then endorse the outcome as regrettable but legitimate.

This writer and co-author Kevin Edmonds published an article on November 15 that argued, "The decision by CARICOM to participate in this deeply flawed election constitutes a significant reversal of the position it took in February 2004 when Haiti's elected president and government were overthrown by a paramilitary revolt with key backing from the U.S., Canada, France and the UN Security Council. At that time, CARICOM condemned the overthrow." [6]

Ricardo Seitenfus says that as a Latin American, Haiti's treatment shames him. It's an "offense to our conscience."

Mark Weisbrot of the Center for Economic Policy Research warns in a recent article that the continued participation of Latin American countries in the MINUSTAH military mission is increasingly untenable as the mission's predatory role becomes more and more evident.

Referring to the attempted coup d'état against the elected government in Venezuela in 2002, he asks rhetorically whether any Latin American government would have dared to participate in an occupation mission had the coup succeeded.

Weisbrot explains the stakes for Latin America and the Caribbean in Haiti thus:

"People who do not understand U.S. foreign policy think that control over Haiti does not matter to Washington, because it is so poor and has no strategic minerals or resources. But that is not how Washington operates.... Left governments will be removed or prevented from taking power where it is possible to do so." [7]

### **'Enough of playing with Haiti'**

In his damning interview, Ricardo Seitenfus describes a vision for Haiti that would see true international solidarity come into play. "Enough of playing with Haiti!" he declares.

While paying tribute to the outpouring of solidarity and compassion following the earthquake, he says that charity cannot be the driving force of international relations. What is needed, he argues, is autonomy and sovereignty of peoples, fair and equitable commerce, and respect by human beings towards each other.

In Haiti, "We must build roads, hydroelectric dams, assist in building government structures, including a judiciary system."

"The UN says it is not mandated to do that," he laments. "It's mandate in Haiti is to maintain the peace of the graveyard."

His prophetic words may no longer grace the offices of the OAS in Haiti. But they have given voice to countless Haitians still living in the miserable conditions of the camps of internally displaced or still waiting for the promised "reconstruction."

They will not wait forever. They will continue to assert their rights. The longer the elites of Haiti and the world fail to offer a vision for the future of the country, the more certain become social explosions through which the people reassert their dignity and their rightful claim to social justice.

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**Notes:**

[1] Haiti is Proof of the Failings of International Aid (in French), interview with Ricardo Seitenfus, *Le Temps*, December 20, 2010.

[2] Impact du cholera sur l'agriculture haïtienne (in French), by William Michel, November 26, 2010.

[3] Haiti cholera outbreak 'came from UN camp', by Deborah Pasmantier, *Agence France Presse*, November 29, 2010.

[4] Haiti: Epidemics of Denial Must End, by Debora MacKenzie, *New Scientist*, December 7, 2010.

[5] Cholera in Haiti: Another Disease of Poverty in a Traumatized Land, by Joia Mukherjee, October 22, 2010.

[6] With Friends Like These...CARICOM and the Flawed Election in Haiti, by Roger Annis and Kevin Edmonds, November 15, 2010.

[7] Wikileaks Cables Show Why Washington Won't Allow Democracy in Haiti, by Mark Weisbrot, *The Guardian*, December 17, 2010.

**Recommended reading on Haiti and Latin America/the Caribbean:**

Fidel Castro comments on Ricardo Seitenfus, Cuba's Training of Haitian Doctors, December 27, 2010.

The Denial of Self Determination: Haiti and the International Community, by Kevin Edmonds, first published in Spanish in *America Latina en movimiento*, December 2010.

With Friends Like These...CARICOM and the Flawed Election in Haiti, By Roger Annis and Kevin Edmonds. November 15, 2010.