

Letter From Haiti: Life in the Ruins

Sunday 24 February 2013, by [WILENTZ Amy](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2013).

Sometimes you can't help but be sickened by the behavior of certain international organizations helping Haiti recover from the devastating January 2010 earthquake—hit, that is, by a wave of real physical nausea. The other day, I spent an afternoon in the displaced persons camp across from the ruins of St. Anne's church in downtown Port-au-Prince. The place was awful, as awful as you can imagine squalid emergency living quarters might be—homes consisting of tent, tarp, tin, sheets, plywood, some cardboard—after three years of dust, dirt, sewage, torrential storms and, to top it off, Hurricane Sandy, which killed at least fifty-four people in Haiti.

Across the street from the camp, where an estimated 600 families are living, Chérestal Jean-Fougère, a camp leader, showed me the portable toilets that had been brought in by relief agencies in the first days after the earthquake. For months, a cleaning company contracted by international relief organizations and consisting of men in rubber regalia came regularly to wash out these toilets with high-powered hoses connected to special pump trucks. I remember watching them back then and wondering how long this miracle could last. Now I have my answer: for the past six months at least, Jean-Fougère said, no one has come to clean. The contract for the job has run out.

It shows. At the edge of the rocky field that was once the St. Anne sanctuary, the five or six portable toilets are festering shit holes, overflowing with stinking excrement and pieces of cardboard that have been used as toilet paper. On some, the doors hang open on broken hinges. "No one goes into these anymore," Jean-Fougère told me. I asked him where residents font leurs besoins now, and he pointed to the curb and also to a gaping hole in the street. When I looked down into this, I saw brackish brown water, glinting and moving. This is the water the camp residents also use for laundry and bathing, Jean-Fougère added.

I toured the camp with Jean-Fougère and some others, a tight scrum of kids and teenagers traveling in our wake. He talked about the usual crises of these camps: gang rapes, routine robberies. ("Stealing what?" I wondered as I peered into the raggedy, unfurnished tents and shacks.) We squelched over a swatch of black carpeting being used to absorb rainwater in front of one older woman's tent. Behind her living area, family groups were stacked, as if in an apartment building, in the nooks and crannies of a playground set that dated back before the earthquake, when this space across from the church was a well-kept public square known as the Place St. Anne. One family occupied the jungle-gym section of the playground, another the platform above the yellow plastic slide. Two more families had set up house under the slide, behind walls made of daisy-patterned sheets. Xavier François, an elderly man, smiling and skeletal, told me his family was killed in the earthquake. He lives nearby under a flapping, deflated tent that hovered three feet above the ground and barely covered a bed frame with no mattress but some old plastic sheeting on it. François had nothing else in this abode.

Now, I'm not blaming the condition of these people entirely on the international organizations. But in the past half-year, outside efforts have created a serious problem. During the spring and summer, several groups working together, including the colossal International Organization for Migration, continued to depopulate a number of camps by offering residents \$500 per family to move out. With this \$500, displaced people are able to afford rent in noncamp housing for about a year. People living in many of the biggest and most visible camps were given money and relocated, and those

camps were taken down.

This was an achievement of sorts, even though many of the people who moved ended up in rubble-strewn neighborhoods or, worse, in windswept interim camps outside the capital, square-box townships with no nearby commerce or jobs or culture. It could be argued that the original post-earthquake camps were worse than these newly slapped-up places, although some of the camps had a lively Haitian bustle that's totally absent in the new townships. The camp people who wanted to be out soon told me they refused to remain for another Christmas; once Christmas was past, they said, they would not submit to a third earthquake anniversary in the camp. But here they were, still in the St. Anne camp just days before the January 12 anniversary.

That \$500 handout is the problem. Haiti, insofar as it exemplifies the regime of international development, is a world of unintended consequences. Walking around St. Anne, I kept thinking to myself: "Come on, people, get yourselves out of this situation. Go anywhere other than this!"

But they're not going anywhere. The people in the St. Anne camp and the other 490 or so remaining camps are angry and confused. They cannot accept the fact that outside organizations would offer \$500 per family to the residents of one camp to move out, but not to those in another camp. So the St. Anne residents are hanging on, unwilling to start up a new life elsewhere for fear of missing out on that \$500, to which they understandably feel entitled, if only for the incredible suffering they've endured. To the average Haitian, \$500 is a huge sum, roughly equivalent to the average yearly salary: say, \$50,000 for a US citizen.

A few days after I left Chérestal Jean-Fougère at St. Anne's, I was supposed to meet two Haitian friends for dinner at the Hotel Montana, which sits between Port-au-Prince and Pétienville, the wealthier financial hub up the hill from the capital. The Montana exists only marginally, because the five-story, 145-room building pancaked to the ground in the earthquake, killing some eighty people. It has not been rebuilt, exactly, although new structures have gone up that are much closer to the ground and earthquake resistant. The rebuilt restaurant and bar was where I was to meet my friends.

The problem was that on this very night, the new luxury Royal Oasis hotel was being inaugurated, and le tout Port-au-Prince had been invited to the formal gala. Because there's only one two-lane road on that side of town, I had to plan my arrival at the Montana carefully so as to avoid getting stuck in the insane SUV traffic of the elegantly dressed guests coming to celebrate the opening.

The "five-star" Royal Oasis is a violation of human decency. Not because it's big and luxurious in a desperately poor country, although it is that: it has 128 rooms, five restaurants, five bars, a conference center, an art gallery and an upscale shopping mall. But the indecent, depraved thing about it is that—amazingly, astoundingly—its construction was financed in part by grants from organizations ostensibly providing post-earthquake reconstruction funds: \$7.5 million from the World Bank's International Finance Corporation went to the Oasis project, as well as \$2 million from the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund, the recovery group headed by former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. (Having funded the Oasis, among other enterprises, the Clinton Bush fund announced that it was ceasing operations at the end of 2012.) The Royal Oasis is one of the few post-quake projects that have come to fruition, unlike dozens of housing and school construction projects.

Let me underline this: these funds were given to a project that was intended to erect a luxury tourist hotel in a country that for the past thirty years has not had a serious tourism industry. And in a country that has suffered a catastrophic earthquake—one that razed several cities, killed an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 people and left more than a million homeless. Many sidewalks in the capital remain strewn with rubble. The people of the St. Anne camp are among the approximately

358,000 Haitians still living in unacceptable conditions in camps around the capital and outlying areas. PS: There's also an ongoing cholera epidemic.

Some have suggested that the World Bank was simply underwriting a place where its employees could stay comfortably and sip espresso at meetings while trying to figure out why Haiti remains so poor. But the Oasis is not the only post-quake tourist accommodation: according to the tourism ministry, a new boom in construction will leave Port-au-Prince with almost twice as many hotel rooms as it had before the earthquake. But as you can probably imagine, there will not be twice as many tourists to occupy them. Some have suggested that many of the new hotels are sophisticated money-laundering operations for drug traffickers, where no one is expected to stay.

I managed to make my way through the Oasis traffic jam to my friends at the Montana. These were people who live, as foreigners who work in Haiti put it, "up the hill"—meaning richer Haitians, those with office jobs, investments, businesses, many of whom work with international development organizations. My friends that evening fit into a number of those categories. When I described my day in the St. Anne camp, and the bubbling anger of the people and their threats to demonstrate and even riot, my friends had a simple analysis. "Of course it's Aristide," they said, referring to the deposed Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who returned from exile in 2011 but has not been seen or heard from since, creating a kind of mystique around this formerly voluble and visible figure. My friends' analysis is this: just as you don't have coups without money, you don't have social unrest without money. These people believe all political unrest these days, whether in camps or schools, is paid for. They point the finger at Aristide, and in a way, they're right: as a symbol of the Haitian people, Aristide is still significant, and when the people raise their voices, up the hill they hear Aristide's voice.

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A few days later, I went with some other friends to check out the Oasis up close, with no inaugural crowds. We tried, for the fun of it, to get a reservation at one of the hotel's five restaurants, but not one was open for business. A single exclusive table of eight people, some of them members of the Haitian aristocracy and some former US embassy personnel, was being served dinner, alone among a sea of empty tables. A friend and I got into the elevator on the second floor after checking out a second restaurant that looked like a contemporary bistro in Rome, to go and see the \$1,320-a-night presidential suite on the ninth floor. But the minute we pressed nine, the power in the cabin went off. We laughed nervously: Wasn't this typical? In the dark, we discussed our predicament. Why had we ever stepped into an elevator in Port-au-Prince? My friend told me that although inaugurated, the hotel would not be opening to guests for another month or so. He vividly described our decomposing bodies being discovered in the elevator by hotel employees at that future moment.

"Who the heck are these people?" he said he could hear them saying. At that point, I pressed the alarm button—for a minute or so. No one came to answer our call, although we could tell from the light beneath the elevator door that the power was on elsewhere. My friend laughed. He's a businessman in Haiti, and he knows how little interest a hotel manager here might have in "the Client" and the Client's problems. Finally, the power came on in the elevator and—miracle—the doors opened. A housekeeper watched us emerge with some amusement.

Here's my proposal: take the 600 families of St. Anne and put them in the Oasis. Those rooms were paid for, after all, with funds that ought to have benefited the camp dwellers. The people of St. Anne can stay at the Royal Oasis for free, and World Bank and Clinton Bush fund officials will pay \$300 a night for the right to change the Haitians' linens and polish their toilets, until the \$9.5 million with which their organizations financed the project is paid back.

But first fix the elevator.

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Routes for foreign intervention into the heart of Haiti are plentiful. About two years after the earthquake, news items started to appear about the search for gold and other precious metals in rural Haiti, but this was not new news: ever since I started visiting the country in the mid-1980s, there had been rumors like this. In fact, these rumors seem to coincide with unrest. Once again, here was gold emerging during a time of uncertainty and worry. Earthquake reconstruction fever was dying away, and the crisis caravan was beginning to pick up stakes and move on. Yet the country was still in its usual state of crisis within the global economy, and also in the throes of post-earthquake traumatic stress disorder. (In Haiti, there is no real “post” to the traumatic stress; it just goes on and on.)

Haiti’s global story began with gold. Columbus made landfall in the New World on Haiti’s north coast. Before returning to Spain, he left a settlement behind to dig for gold. The settlers enslaved the indigenous Arawak population and set them to work mining ore. Within fifty years, almost the entire Arawak population perished from overwork, starvation and disease, creating a need for imported labor in the form of African slaves.

Most of the exploration and future mining will take place in the same general area where sailors from Columbus’s fleet first began digging—far from earthquake land, in other words. In fact, most of the money being spent by private enterprise and by international organizations to “develop” Haiti in the wake of the earthquake is in undamaged areas such as the north, where it has been encouraged by funding from the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank, as well as by former President Clinton and soon-to-be-former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Foreign development groups and the Haitian government claim that “Haiti is open for business,” but in the north you see billboards in French saying that, more specifically, “The North” is open for business.

The terrain had already been prepared for international mining before the earthquake. About two weeks after the catastrophe, reports began filtering in of a gold exploration firm buying shares of a company that held drilling permits in one part of the country. About a year later, a new internationally supported and promoted Haitian government was in place, and the extractors were ready. Gold is now valued at about \$1,700 an ounce (a night in the presidential suite at the Oasis, plus some left over for shopping). Silver and copper are also thought to lie in plentiful millions of ounces below Haiti’s fields, hills and mountains.

Speaking about Haiti’s gold last May, Dieuseul Anglade, a geologist and then director of Haiti’s Bureau of Mines, was widely quoted as saying that “if the mining companies are honest and if Haiti has a good government, then here is a way for this country to move forward.” This was not a statement from a naïve person; Anglade, who had worked for the bureau for the better part of three decades, was no doubt making a point. Two points, really. One, Haiti has never had a good government. Two, it’s very hard, if not impossible, to find a gold mining company that has ever experienced even a short bout of honesty. While Anglade was still at the bureau, the new government under President Micky Martelly, a popular singer, signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Eurasian Minerals and with Newmont Mining, one of the world’s largest extraction enterprises, to authorize exploratory drilling. Anglade felt that the agreement contravened Haitian law and refused to sign the document. Instead, he says, it was signed by the minister of public works, whose agency is in charge of the Bureau of Mines. Anglade himself was fired.

“They want everything,” Anglade told me recently, referring to the mining firms. “The taxes to be

levied on them are too favorable. They have been given too many advantages and too few taxes. Haiti's share of the profits from these mines must total 50 percent." Under the terms of the MOU, the sections in Haiti's longstanding mining conventions protecting that 50 percent have been eliminated.

Outside exploiters are in the habit of using extravagant terms. At the height of the sugar plantation slave economy, Haiti was known as "the Pearl of the Antilles." One international minerals exploration official recently called Haiti "the sleeping giant of the Caribbean." The square mileage now licensed for exploration to outside mineral and metal extractors is the equivalent of about 15 percent of the country's total land mass, according to one estimate. So far, there has been no sign of onsite government monitoring, even though Newmont has been known to pollute and also to use tough-guy methods with labor at some of its sites, most recently in Peru. It's disturbing that destructive extraction activities may go forward unsupervised in a place where so little attention is paid to public safety, the environment and fair taxation. And yet Ludner Remarais, director general of the Bureau of Mines, could not contain a kind of giddy, laughing delight as he told me how proud Haiti should be to attract the interest of world-class firms like Newmont. "They are a big North American company," he said. "Newmont is a guarantee for us in Haiti for the development of the mining sector."

No doubt Newmont could be a good partner in exploring Haiti's precious metals reserves. But good partners need strong regulations. If Haiti indulges in its usual business practices when dealing with extractors, the only real tax on them will be bribes and gifts to Haitian businessmen, large landholders and politicians. The only obstacles to the rape of the land will be peasants, who are easily swept away. And the sole addition to the Haitian economy will be the enrichment of those associated with mining—and I don't mean lowly miners. Meanwhile, rivers and ecosystems, already fragile in this environmentally damaged country, could be poisoned, leading to even lower agricultural output.

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More news from the north: at the new garment factory run by Sae-A, a South Korean apparel giant with twenty-two factories worldwide, 1,290 workers are making T-shirts for Walmart and, soon, Target. (The T-shirts retail for about \$5.50, while most of Sae-A's Haitian workers make less than \$5 a day.) The plant is a vast, brightly lit factory—no ancient Bangladeshi sweatshop firetrap, this—in a huge new post-earthquake industrial park in Caracol, far, far from the destruction wrought by the quake and far also from any of the new townships where former camp people are living, lured by the promise of factory jobs to places where no factories have been built.

Caracol and its power plant and soon-to-be-implemented port were financed by \$220 million set aside just after the earthquake by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Inter-American Development Bank. The South Korean firm was offered many financial incentives to become the first big post-quake factory to try its luck in Haiti. The justification given for spending earthquake redevelopment money in non-earthquake-affected areas was that it would help decentralize the country and take population pressure off the capital. Perhaps, but tell that to the people in St. Anne. Tell that to bony old Xavier François, living under his broken tent.

The huge Caracol park is on a solid new road financed by the European Union (no potholes, unlike Haiti's old National Highway No. 1). The road extends from the northern city of Cap-Haïtien all the way to the border with the Dominican Republic, for easy export and import of goods and supplies. Most businesspeople dealing with mining or the industrial park fly into Cap-Haïtien from Miami or Port-au-Prince, but because I wanted to see the places in between, we drove up along the rutted, washed-out national highway. It's an eight- or nine-hour drive that should take three hours.

There are plans for renovating and expanding Cap-Haïtien's airport, but none under way for fixing the national highway. Cap-Haïtien is a more livable city than Port-au-Prince, with far less population pressure. It's near the greatest tourist sights in Haiti: the Citadelle, King Henri Christophe's early-nineteenth-century mountaintop fortress, and Sans-Souci, the king's palace at Milot, to which decent roads have also been built with foreign funding. Cap-Haïtien is also near Labadee, the beach resort and Royal Caribbean cruise stop. For years, the tourism ministry has been pointing to the north as a plausible center for tourism, and now the international community seems to agree.

It's as if the international community had thrown up its hands in despair over the rest of Haiti, especially those areas affected by the quake. It's as if the recovery people had decided to develop the north as virtually another country and tossed the south, along with hundreds of thousands of displaced people, into the poubelle of history. "You could call it 'getting on with what's possible,'" a friend of mine who works in development said, shrugging.

Estrella, a Dominican firm, won the contract to build the industrial park, which is to employ some 60,000 if all goes well. Indeed, the Dominican Republic has been seizing on Haiti's post-earthquake vulnerability to make economic and cultural incursions into its historic rival's territory. For sale in the markets of Haiti are Dominican sausage, Dominican eggs, Dominican tomato paste and canned sardines, Dominican ketchup and mayo, and Dominican spaghetti. You can have an entire Haitian Creole meal these days made exclusively from foods imported from the DR. I've watched these meals being prepared by women in the camps.

The new economic plan for Haiti is less about Haiti than it is about imports and exports: it's a maquiladora plan that undermines agriculture and pushes more and more Haitians into the global cash economy, where most cannot compete for resources in any meaningful way. Certainly, the new plan means that Haiti will be less and less able to feed its people. That's been the trend for years, since the United States began dumping surplus subsidized rice into the Haitian market. Now it's accelerating.

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At the garment factory, my guides were intent on showing me the First World norms of the place. They showed me the foam pads for workers to stand on (many of the women are on their feet for an entire eight-hour work day). They point out the Haitian music on the speakers. They tell me about the very modern electronic sewing machines from Japan. They discuss the cooling system. The cooling system makes this garment factory not a sweatshop but just a... shop.

South of Caracol park, housing is going up, but no one—including people closely affiliated with Caracol—will say whether this housing, subsidized by USAID, is destined to be used by Caracol employees. Each house there cost a stupendous \$31,000 to build, according to The New York Times. The Sae-A factory workers have to pay a substantial part of their wages for transportation, so if the deal were done fairly, nearby housing might be a boon to them. Or they might, as is the tradition in such employment, end up paying rent to the company and buying lunch from the company and... There is a union at the Sae-A plant, but I did not get the impression that it's entirely free from management control.

Another part of the northern development plan is the University of King Henri Christophe in Limonade, built after the earthquake just a few miles away from Caracol and completely financed by the Dominican Republic. Like the Sae-A plant, the university is a fantastic new facility that looks like an architect's model. Even the 2,000 students there seem like little figurines, while the well-kept, well-irrigated shrubs and flowers look like model shrubs and flowers.

Inside, this impression is not dispelled. Kids mill around the landings and courtyards, flirting and chatting. They kick a ball in a central meeting area that has the breadth and openness of a parade ground in Beijing. The reason the students seem to have a lot of time on their hands is that there are very few classes at Limonade. The problem is not finding students; there were 7,600 applicants for 2,000 spots. The problem is finding qualified teachers to come live in Limonade and teach them.

Jean-Marie Théodat, the new dean, talked to me about the shock of coming home from Paris to lead the school after living abroad for some thirty years. He'd been teaching geography at the Sorbonne. "Of course," he said, "we are building institutions in a fairly empty landscape; it's not like the Sorbonne. Still, our model here in Limonade would be Silicon Valley. We want synergy between the university, the industrial park and the tourist industry of the north." The university's emphasis, Théodat added, is on science and technology, although the humanities are also represented. He said he has commitments from fifty teachers or professors, but he needs twice that many. The students' books are gifts from Haitians in the Francophone diaspora community (the school, which is associated with the State University of Haiti in Port-au-Prince, teaches in French). The students live in rented rooms or apartments in nearby communities, but soon there will be dormitories and a cafeteria. I asked Théodat if the new building is earthquake-proof. "We'll see when there is an earthquake," he answered, smiling. He continued with the tour: "I want every student to see at least one teacher every day. In any other country, we would be facing a strike by now."

Half an hour away from the new university stands the Citadelle, the great icon of Haiti's sovereignty. It's a complicated symbol no matter how you parse it. With a bit of help from German engineers, the former Haitian slaves, as post-revolutionary masters of their fate, erected this massive fortress on the top of a mountain with a commanding view of the northern coast and Cap-Haïtien. It was King Henri's lookout, his defense against foreign (especially French) incursions against the infant Haitian nation, as well as against any simmering domestic plots or uprisings.

As I came upon the towering, colossal Citadelle, its walls were swathed in a swirling mist—first hidden in cloud, then revealed. I was moved by the monument, even though I knew it was not what Haitians often made it out to be: it had defended Haiti against nothing, even though it remains a symbol of profound national meaning. Its old cannonballs were stacked like lemons in the market; they'd been ready for battle since the 1820s.

The afternoon I was there, the Citadelle's floors were slick with rain and moss. The day was growing dark and the giant fortress rose over me like a skyscraper, weirdly modern and huge, Brutalist in style. Peasants from below, whose families have lived in the shadows of King Henri's battlements for generations, walked with us up the steep and narrow road, constructed in the 1990s with USAID financing. Alongside us trudged guides with mules and donkeys. As I walked, the men told me how glad they would be if their daughters or sisters could get a job at the Sae-A factory. It would be like a miracle, they said. King Henri's old dream of liberty and sovereignty soared above me at the top of the mountain, but at Caracol that morning, I had seen what his descendants had been brought to.

And no surprise: when the invaders finally did return, they debarked in Port-au-Prince, not the north. Weakened by generations of corrupt rule, civil war and a crushing early national debt, the Haitians were not a serious match for the US Marines and their nineteen-year occupation, a dispiriting and repressive time that prepared the way for decades of dictatorship by the Duvaliers. Against all these exploiters and kleptocrats, the Citadelle was useless. As it has been, also, against the army of development organizations and multinational investors and lenders who, along with their Haitian sidekicks in government and business, have only further impoverished the country since the fall of the Duvalier dynasty, while making noises about their support for democracy and the encouragement of civil society. Rather than providing a defense against foreign incursion, the Citadelle—like Haiti's deep pool of cheap labor, like its gold and even (incredibly) its recent

catastrophic natural disaster—has become just another attraction, another national resource that keeps the outside exploiters coming down.

Amy Wilentz

Kathie Klarreich and Linda Polman recently reported (Nov. 19) on how the international relief effort after the 2010 earthquake excluded Haitians from their own recovery, in “[The NGO Republic of Haiti](#).” Available on ESSF (article 27013).

P.S.

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