

Angry demonstrators demand Sarkozy to pay up and return Aristide to Haiti

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Haitian president Rene Preval turns his back on the crowd and leaves after demonstrators demand he allow ousted president Jean-Bertrand Aristide to return.

Port au Prince, Haiti - HIP — Thousands of supporters of ousted president Jean-Bertrand Aristide took to the streets on Wednesday as French president Nicolas Sarkozy toured the earthquake ravaged capital of Port au Prince. Holding pictures of the ousted president aloft they chanted for France to pay more than 21 billion dollars in restitution and reparations and to return Aristide as Sarkozy's helicopter landed near Haiti's quake damaged national palace. Their demands stem from a long held dispute over compensation a nascent Haiti was forced to pay French slave owners in exchange for recognition of their independence and France's role in ousting Aristide in 2004.

Aristide, who remains widely popular among Haiti's poor, first raised the issue of restitution and reparations in April 2003. His government argued that an agreement reached in 1825 forcing Haiti to pay 90 million gold francs to compensate their former slave masters severely crippled Haiti's economic development. The debt included massive interest and took 122 years to pay off with the final installment made in 1947. His government calculated that the total sum of the debt Haiti was forced to pay with interest, along with reparations for the unpaid labor of millions of slaves kidnapped from Africa and forced to work on French plantations in Haiti, came to more than 21 billion dollars. Aristide's administration pushed the issue on the international stage while airing commercials several times a day in Haiti that said, "We demand reparations and restitution. France, pay me my money, \$21,685,135,571.48."

Aristide was forced out of the country in a coup ten months later on Feb. 29, 2004 and flown to the former French colony of the Central African Republic. Although the main author of the coup is still seen as the administration of George W. Bush, Haitians have never forgotten the role that France played in supporting the opposition movement to Aristide and their demands that he resign.

Several weeks before Aristide was forced onto a plane and flown into exile, the government of then French president Jacques Chirac dispatched Véronique Albanet and Régis Debray to demand that he resign. In an interview with writer Claude Ribbe one year after his ouster Aristide said, "These two French personalities came to the National Palace and asked me so. That is already known. The threats were groundless, they were evident and direct. As good Haitians, we are respectful but we demand to be respected and we replied with respect and dignity. The threats were evident and direct: you resign or you might be [killed]!"

Before his tour of the destruction in Haiti's capital and during an address to Haitian dignitaries, French president Sarkozy offered \$400 million dollars in emergency assistance, reconstruction funds, and support for the Haitian government's operating budget. This was in addition to France's earlier decision to cancel Haiti's debt of \$77 million dollars.

Paulette Joseph, a member of the Lavalas Mobilization Commission and one of the organizers of the demonstration responded, "That's great that Sarkozy has come to give France's support to the Haitian people in this difficult moment after the terrible earthquake that killed so many of our people and now forces us to live in greater misery." Joseph continued, "But \$477 million dollars doesn't even come close to the damage France inflicted upon Haiti before the earthquake. We were suffering from poverty before this crisis as a result of the debt Haiti was forced to pay the slave masters to recognize our independence. If our country is not equipped to handle this crisis and we are suffering more after the earthquake it is a direct result of that debt."

"We need Aristide to return!" shouted demonstrators as Haitian president Preval made a rare appearance on the lawn in front of Haiti's destroyed seat of government following Sarkozy's visit. Waving photos of Aristide they also began chanting, "If Aristide were here he would be suffering along with us!" as Preval turned his back on the crowd and withdrew to his luxury jeep amid tight security.

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