

# Haiti: From trafficking to debt - France ransomed the people

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**This Caribbean country is not in debt, it is a creditor. It is France which owes it money. Explanation by Jerome Duval, of CADTM. Translated by Jenny Bright.**

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Poverty in colonised countries has greatly increased due to a transfer of debt: the debts incurred by the colonial powers to the World Bank, to make the most of it, were then transferred without their consent to the colonised countries that gained their independence. They constitute a case of odious debt, as well as the subsequent debts contracted to repay them.

In Santo Domingo, on the night of 22-23 August, 1791, tens of thousands of slaves simultaneously rose up in an armed uprising, propelling a long process that led to history's first abolition of slavery, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1793, and the proclamation of independence. Santo Domingo, then reclaiming the name of Haiti, became the first independent black republic in 1804, a unique case in the history of a revolt of slaves that gave birth to a State. France has probably never forgiven this uprising, resulting in the loss of revenue from its slave system and thousands of destroyed sugar and coffee plantations. Haiti paid very dearly: in 1825, the country was forced to pay France 150 million gold francs (i.e. France's annual budget at the time) intended to "compensate" the former slave master colonists for loss of "ownership" in exchange for recognition of its existence as a nation-state. The ransom was imposed under the threat of military invasion: on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April, 1825, a fleet of 14 warships were assembled in the bay of Port-au-Prince, ready to intervene, suggesting a possible restoration of slavery in the case of insubordination.

This ransom extorted from the Haitian people for "daring" to achieve independence, was renegotiated thirteen years later, in 1838, to 90 million following an agreement scandalously named "Traité de l'amitié" (Treaty of friendship). With generations weighed down by the weight of an illegitimate debt, Haiti, which has struggled for years to emancipate itself from French tutelage and free itself from slavery, would pay, from 1825 to 1893, every last cent of the ransom to its former colonists. For Louis-Georges Tin, president of the Representative council of black associations (Conseil représentatif des associations noires - Cran), "the money must return to the Haitian state and Haitian civil society. The time has come to amend this double punishment suffered by the island, slavery then ransom. The destitution of Haiti is due to the payment of these 90 million gold francs, which forced the country to become indebted over decades".

## **No excuse, no reparation, no restitution: without a conscience, France ransomed the people**

In April 2003, on the occasion of the bicentennial of the death of Toussaint Louverture, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide affirmed that it is France which is indebted to Haiti, and not the opposite. He demanded "restitution and reparation" for the damages inflicted by slavery and for the ransom demanded in 1825. He requested from France 21 billion dollars, or the capitalised value of the 90 million francs, to be paid as a tribute. But after the Franco-American political and military intervention that led to the overthrow of Aristide in February 2004, the various regimes that succeeded at the head of the Haitian state, would abandon the claim for restitution.

It was not until the earthquake of the 12<sup>th</sup> of January, 2010, which resulted in at least 250,000 deaths and left nearly 1.3 million people homeless, that a French president would set foot on the territory of their former colony for the first time since the independence of the island in 1804. Thus, after having let more than a month pass after the earthquake, Nicolas Sarkozy finally made a visit for just four hours on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February. This was an opportunity to praise the French private sector by paying tribute to Suez and Veolia who "repaired water pipes" or EDF which "restored public lighting". And to announce some 326 million euros in aid. Of this sum, 56 million would not be mobilised since it referred to an accounting erasure from the Paris Club of the bilateral debt that the island had contracted vis-à-vis France.

Sarkozy's generous declaration of debt cancellation as a response to the disaster was revealed to be part of a heinous debt-laundering mechanism. Moreover, there is nothing new here since this decision actually dates from July 2009, after Haiti reached the completion point of the enhanced heavily indebted poor countries initiative (enhanced HIPC initiative) on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, 2009. For its part, the World Bank did not cancel the 38 million dollar repayment, but only suspended it for five years and, the IMF decided to grant "aid" worth 100 million dollars in the form of... a loan, of course without interest, but which will also have to be repaid. We are far from the 21 billion requested by Aristide and social movements such as the Haitian Platform to Advocate Alternative Development (PAPDA) and far from satisfying Haiti's needs.

Seizing the opportunity, a group of activists called the Committee for the immediate refund of stolen billions (Comité pour le remboursement immédiat des milliards envolés - Crime) carried out a hoax in July 2010, announcing on a fake website of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs the intention of France to restore to Haitians on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July the improperly collected sums. Nothing happened. Despite an open letter to French President Sarkozy, France still refused to repay the historic debt to Haiti. France, however, has a heavy burden of responsibility for the state of poverty which its population is suffering. For example, when it granted political refugee status and immunity to Jean-Claude Duvalier, exiled to the Côte d'Azur in France after 29 years of dictatorship from father to son, with a fortune of 900 million dollars stolen from the coffers of the Haitian State, an amount then higher than the external debt of the country estimated at 750 million dollars in 1986.

### **Lie and aberration of Hollande's "moral debt"**

It is probably not due to chance that more than two centuries had passed since the independence of the island before a French head of state took their first trip - this time official - to Haiti. The visit of President François Hollande on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May, 2015 was greeted by demonstrators demanding "compensation" and "restitution" by France of the sum paid by Haiti for its independence. "Hollande, money yes, morality no", could be read on signs, in reference to the speech made a few days earlier by the head of state visiting Guadeloupe on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May. Raising many hopes in Haiti,

he said: "When I come to Haiti, I will pay the debt that we have." But, in reality, Hollande wanted to speak only of "moral debt" and not of restitution of the billions that Haiti paid to France. As pointed out by Louis-Georges Tin, also author of the book *Esclavage et réparations, comment faire face aux crimes de l'histoire* (Slavery and Reparations, how to deal with the crimes of history) (Stock, 2013): "Repentance is a moral or religious issue; reparation is an economic and political problem." Now, *Le Nouvelliste*, the island's main newspaper, writes: "... this moral debt, Haiti has never asked compensation for. It is irreparable, we agree. We will leave it as a blot on the crest of the civilised". But he goes on: "... France also has a financial debt with regard to Haiti. This debt is a case that is unique in history. This is the only time the victors have paid tribute to the vanquished. And it is this ransom paid throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it is necessary to speak of, since it has hindered the Haitian economy, strangled its development and still mortgages its future.

The French government prefers to ask the population to forgive and forget the issues that disturbed the past rather than finally understand that Haiti is not indebted, but a creditor.

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**P.S.**

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