

## **SOME BASIC INFORMATION ON HAITI (REPUBLIQUE D'HAITI)**

### ***Location:***

Haiti is the western third of the island of Hispaniola, bordering the Dominican Republic on the east. It is separated by the Windward Passage (a 50 mile wide corridor) from Cuba which is in turn just 90 miles from Florida.

***Size:*** 27,750 square miles

Compare this to Minnesota which has 86,943 square miles.

***Population:*** (CIA/World Factbook 2008 estimate) about 9,000,000 people; Density: 324 persons per square mile (terrain is 70% mountainous).

Minnesota's population (2006 estimate) is 5,167,101 for a density of 59.4 per square mile.

### ***Ethnic composition:***

94.2% are of African origin with the rest being of African-European or other origin.

### ***Languages:***

French and Creole are the official languages. Creole is a language with West African grammatical structures but with a 90% French vocabulary. The spelling of Creole is phonetically based on English and not a written language until after World War II. This system was created by a Protestant missionary and officially adopted in 1961. While everyone speaks Creole every day, only a few people actually speak French to one another - in the government and at most universities. While French is an "official" language, is taught in schools, and all government documents are in French, it has limited use otherwise.

### ***Economic condition:***

In Haiti the average annual per capita income is about \$350. About 37% of the population live in urban areas and their income averages \$409 per year. Of those living in the rural areas, 80% live in dire poverty.

Minnesota's median household income in 2000 was \$47,113. The median black household income in MN is \$28,926.

### ***Health:***

Life expectancy in Haiti is 57.6 years. In the USA, the life expectancy for a black person is 73.1 years, and for a white person, it is 78.3 years. In Haiti the infant mortality rate is 62.3 deaths/1,000 live births; in the US it is 6.3/1,000 live births

Haiti has 1 doctor for 9,846 persons. In the USA this ratio is 1 to 365.

Haitians consume on an average 1,977 calories per day, 87% of the minimum requirement. In the USA the average is 3,318 calories or 132% of the minimum requirement.

### ***Education:***

In Haiti, the literacy rate is 52.9%. In the USA, it is 99%. In the USA, .9% of the population have only a primary education, whereas in Haiti, only 8.6% of the population has a **secondary** education. About 62% of the primary aged youth attend primary school and about 18% attend secondary school; most schools are private.

## **BRIEF HISTORY OF HAITI**

### **1492 and 16<sup>th</sup> Century**

Columbus discovered the island on his first voyage to the New World and named it Hispaniola. Spaniards settled mostly the eastern end of the island and within the next 40 years, the entire native Arawak population, who called the island Aayti, meaning “mountainous country”, died of European diseases against which they had no immunity or were killed or enslaved.

### **17<sup>th</sup> Century**

French pirates often raided the western end of the island, so Spain eventually withdrew their defense as it was too expensive/difficult. French entrepreneurs began plantations and founded Port de Paix in the northwest in 1664 and also Cap Francois, now known as Cap Haitien. In 1697, Spain ceded the western third of the island to France and the colony was named Saint-Domingue.

### **18<sup>th</sup> Century**

The French colony became the most prosperous in the New World due to slave labor on the coffee, cotton, indigo, cocoa and sugar plantations. The treatment of the slaves, who came from 10 or more different tribes in Africa, was extremely abusive, and the death rate was high. 20,000 slaves had to be imported annually just to maintain the work force. Only a minority of slaves were born on the island.

In 1789, the French Revolution began and the ideas of the Rights of Man spread throughout the population on the island. The population of about 556,000 consisted of 500,000 slaves. Among the rest were very rich white, often absentee, landowners (grands blancs), who sided with the opposition to the revolutionaries, and a poor white artisan class (petits blancs), who embraced the ideas of the French Revolution. There were also a wealthy mulatto class and a small number of free blacks, who had no political rights.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Inspired by the Revolution, an uprising took place starting in 1791. In 1794, slavery was abolished and in May 1801, the leader of the rebellion, Toussaint Louverture, was made governor general. Toussaint Louverture was a former slave, the George Washington of Haiti, and his name translates “all saints or souls” and “the opening”. The colony was on its way to independence. But the French under Napoleon went back on their word, sent a military force, arrested Louverture and imprisoned him in France, where he died. Napoleon also reestablished slavery. Upon hearing this, another rebellion under two leaders started in 1802, and the rebel forces defeated French forces in November, 1803. On January 1, 1804, the independent state of Haiti was declared, the first black republic

and the second free republic (after the USA) established in the “New World” (western hemisphere).

First one and then another of the leaders declared themselves emperor. The second, Henry Christophe, built a spectacular palace and an imposing fort, the Citadelle, on a high mountain south of Cap-Haitien. Many forts were built in order to defend the nation from the expected re-invasion of the French forces. Civil war broke out between blacks under Christophe in the north and mulattos under Petion in the south. Boyer succeeded Petion and became president of the whole country after Christophe’s suicide in 1820, until 1843. Petion invaded the Spanish part of the island, and Haiti held it until 1844. France recognized Haiti in 1825 and abolished slavery in its colonies for a second time in 1848. The U. S. recognized Haiti in 1862 after the secession of the Southern slave states. Between 1843 and 1915 there were 20 rulers with many revolutions and assassinations in Haiti. In the 1890s, the U. S. gained military and commercial privileges in Haiti.

### **20<sup>th</sup> Century**

By 1905, the U. S. had gained a secure financial foothold and valuable concessions in Haiti. U. S. Marines occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934. The occupation was resented by many who felt it was to protect U. S. investments. The construction of public works, such as health clinics, sewage treatment and roads did not satisfy the people. Forced labor was used to build roads which caused a revolt, suppressed by the Marines. A national assembly was elected in 1930, the first since 1918, and it chose Vincent as president. President Roosevelt withdrew the Marines but U. S. fiscal control continued through 1947, and the occupation left the mulatto elites in control. Vincent was elected directly in 1935. He was succeeded in 1941 and in 1946, strikes by students and workers caused military officers to take control. Several presidents tried to extend their terms and military take-overs forced them out until 1956.

### **The Duvalier Regime 1957-1986**

In 1956, Francois Duvalier (Papa Doc), a black physician formerly employed in a U.S. medical aide scheme, was elected promising to take economic and political power away from the elites and give in to the black majority. Duvalier overthrew attempts to oust him with a group of violent adherents, the private presidential police force called the Tontons Macoutes, who terrorized any opposition. He did succeed in getting himself “elected” president for life, in fact establishing himself as dictator and choosing his successor, his son Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) in 1971. All political opposition was banned, but finally in 1986, demonstrations organized by the Catholic Church and other churches forced Duvalier out. He and his family went into exile in France.

### **Post-Duvalier Governments**

A five member council headed by General Namphy took over. Much chaos followed with violence and coups as Duvalierists tried to regain power, but the country was in de facto military control.

Finally, with pressure from the U.S., a third attempt at elections succeeded. In 1990, Jean-Baptist Aristide, a popular Catholic priest who had led protests, was elected by 67% of the vote. But in September, 1991, the government was overthrown in a violent military coup. With the interventions of foreign ambassadors, Aristide was allowed to go into

exile in the U. S. Some say Aristide's policies posed little threat to the established social order and that he was overthrown because he insisted that the rich pay taxes and the military end its drug trafficking. Others say he was instigating people to steal and take whatever they wanted from the rich and that they defended themselves by instigating his overthrow. Under (the first) President George Bush, the U.S. imposed a trade embargo in 1991 on Haiti after the coup and pressured other countries to honor the embargo, which devastated the fragile Haitian economy. Mixed U. S. foreign policy attitudes toward Aristide during his exile make interesting reading, but finally the Clinton administration acted decisively to restore the democratically elected government by holding the military to its agreement to step down and by sending troops under a U. N. Security Council resolution to prevent any coups. The embargo was then ended. Aristide returned to Haiti in 1994 and the presidency was passed peacefully upon the election of his hand picked successor Rene Preval in 1996. Their constitution prevents a president from serving two terms in a row.

The situation looked promising for Haiti but the conditions in Haiti have not improved. In fact, many say that the conditions in Haiti are worse now than they were under Baby Doc Duvalier. Under Preval, the Senate failed to approve his choice for prime minister by one vote, causing him to dissolve parliament. The U.N. withdrew aid and other foreign aid was frozen.

In 2000, the Lavalas Party of Aristide won a majority of parliament seats but the election was questioned as not fair by both international parties and the electoral council. The opposition parties and the Lavalas were at a stalemate and never resolved the election issues. The parliament was suspended. In November, 2000, Aristide was returned to the presidency by 92% of the vote. In 2001, there was an attempted coup on the presidential palace. Some say it was staged by Aristide supporters so that the government could crack down on opposition. Much foreign aid was been lost.

In 2003, political protests and unrest broke out in Port-au-Prince, with students in particular demonstrating that the Aristide government was doing nothing at all for the country. Pro-Aristide gangs countered, and some protesters, professors and gang members were killed. In December, 2003, the universities were shut down due to the unsafe conditions.

Unrest continued in 2004, particularly in the city of Gonaives, where a group of rebels took over the town, and the rebellion spread to other cities. This eventually led to a march towards Port-au-Prince where it appeared a bloody street battle was about to occur. President Aristide then left the country and an interim government was appointed by a council of elders. United Nations troops were requested and still occupy Haiti to try and keep a relative peace.

In the meantime, a strong rainfall from hurricane Jeanne in September of 2004 caused massive flooding in Gonaives, the third largest city in Haiti with over 80,000 people, causing destruction of 75% of the homes and an estimated 2,000 deaths. It has been a humanitarian disaster in this poor country where getting the basics of life: water, food, clothing and shelter, is always a daily struggle even before this disaster struck.

In February, 2006, Haiti held its first presidential election in 6 years. Rene Preval, previously president from 1995 – 2000, was elected among 35+ candidates. A new parliament was elected as well and the new government began in earnest in May, 2006.

Some people are optimistic that Preval might be able to use his experience and the general fatigue of political factions for fighting one another and bring together a functioning government to help the people. It is a daunting task, given Haiti's history.

Will Haiti rise to this challenge, with the help of international assistance? Only time will tell.