

Haiti history

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Haiti has the distinction of being the first black independent republic, who only two centuries ago was the wealthiest country in the New World and represented more than a quarter of France's economy. Yet today Haiti has been called " un pays tite-en-bas" where about 80% of Haitians live in absolute poverty, and almost 1/3 of the population is ill or underweight. A long history of political oppression, soil erosion, lack of knowledge and population density of 618 people per square mile has caused modern Haiti to become the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

After almost 200 years of rule by a series of despotic emperors, eccentric kings, cruel dictators, powerless presidents and tyrannical generals Haiti is living in absolute poverty. Haiti has a GDP of less than \$8 billion a year and the per capita income is less than \$250 showing how poor Haiti truly is.

When half a million slaves revolted against their colonial masters in 1804, Haiti became the first nation to abolish slavery. Haiti saw 22 heads of state in 72 years causing unrest and turmoil between the Haitian people.

After four consecutive years of Haitian presidents being murdered or disposed, the United States sent marines to Haiti. When the Americans left in 1934, Haiti was again in turmoil, with frequent coups, revolutions, dictatorship, and street violence until the election of Francois Duvalier in 1957. Duvalier's rule soon turned into one of repression and fear and he soon declared himself president-for-life in 1964. Following his death, his son Jean-Claude used the same violent methods of his father to keep control of Haiti.

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Under his poor leadership, Haiti became one of the world's poorest countries. Most of Haiti's economic problems are the result of economic mismanagement and government corruption. Forests were cleared, which caused soil erosion, making the land dry and infertile. Farming employs nearly three-fifths of the workforce (see figure 1). The average salary is only \$70 a month, and yet inflation tops 14% a year. The growing population has forced many small farmers to concentrate on growing food for themselves, making it impossible to have any income.

Nearly 3/4 of the population of Haiti cooks with charcoal, cutting down so many trees that deforestation of the mountains is a major problem. Only about 4% of the land is forest, compared to 30% of US land (see figure 2 ; 3). Extreme weather conditions further threaten the land, with torrential rains during hurricane season racing down deforested mountains and destroying fields, roads and homes. This has caused a horrific impact on Haiti. Fewer than 13% have access to safe drinking water, and most Haitians struggle to find enough food to eat each day (it is estimated that Haiti produces only 40% of the food it needs).

Although public education in Haiti is free, textbooks and other school materials are not, and as a result many children, especially those in rural areas (the 90% of Haitians that live in absolute poverty, also called peasants) cannot afford to go to school. It is estimated that about 90% of Haitians are illiterate. Even though legally, education is free and open to all, only about 30% of Haitian children ever begin school, and of the 30%, only 2% stay in school beyond the 5th grade.

Many factors play into the lack of education in Haiti, such as education being mainly in French, even though Creole is the official language in Haiti, also after the fifth year students must pass a difficult examination, which is also in French, causing many students to not pass. The lack of proper teachers and inadequate supplies, as well as overcrowding in schools has made it difficult for Haitians to get an education. Haiti's misfortune has continued through the years with a series of natural disasters.

Severe deforestation, leading to flooding and landslides, and a lack of proper emergency services and infrastructure has resulted in the storms causing the deaths of thousands of Haitians. In 2008, four separate hurricanes - Fay, Gustav, Hanna, and Ike - in the space of 30 days led to the deaths of more than 800 people. About 60 per cent of the country's harvest were destroyed and entire cities were rendered desolate and uninhabitable. In January 2010, a devastating 7.0 magnitude earthquake resulting in the deaths of thousands and the loss of many homes and buildings (see figure 5).

Haiti is a country full of tragedy and despair. 380 000 Haitians were infected with HIV/AIDS by 2000 and the life expectancy has dropped to the early age of 53. Only 8 people out of every thousand have telephone service and less than 6% of people have access to electrical power. Yet a small portion of the country is not effected by the massive poverty, but instead live a life of luxury. 0.5% of Haiti's population earns about 46% of the nations income, thus giving the rich more power causing even more corruption.

Many organizations such as The Canadian Red Cross and Hope for Haiti are aiming to restore this once hopeful country. The United Nations Stabilization

Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) was established on June 1 2004, and continues to help Haiti today. MINUSTAH peacekeepers help provide basic needs such as clean water to cholera affected towns, where close to 50, 000 cases have been reported. The UN has established an emergency response effort to bring relief to this stricken country, yet even with so much help, Haiti is still a country that has lost all its wealth and is now in great debt with the world.