



BACKGROUND - HAITI

Haiti became the world's first black-led republic and the first independent Caribbean state when it threw off French colonial control and slavery in a series of wars in the early 19th century.

However, decades of poverty, environmental degradation, violence, instability and dictatorship have left it as the poorest nation in the Americas.

A mostly mountainous country with a tropical climate, Haiti's location, history and culture - epitomized by voodoo - once made it a potential tourist hot spot, but instability and violence, especially since the 1980s, have severely dented that prospect.

Haiti achieved notoriety during the brutal dictatorships of the voodoo physician Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude, or "Baby Doc". Tens of thousands of people were killed under their 29-year rule.

Hopes that the election in 1990 of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former priest, would herald a brighter future were dashed when he was overthrown by the military a short time later.

Although economic sanctions and US-led military intervention forced a return to constitutional government in 1994, Haiti's fortunes did not pick up, with allegations of electoral irregularities, ongoing extra-judicial killings, torture and brutality.

A bloody rebellion, and pressure from the US and France, forced Mr. Aristide out of the country in 2004.

Since then, an elected leadership has taken over from an interim government and a UN stabilization force has been deployed. But Haiti is still plagued by violent confrontations between rival gangs and political groups and the UN has described the human rights situation as "catastrophic".

Meanwhile, Haiti's most serious underlying social problem, the huge wealth gap between the impoverished Creole-speaking black majority and the French-speaking minority, 1% of whom own nearly half the country's wealth, remains unaddressed.

Many Haitians seek work and a better life in the US or other Caribbean nations, including the neighboring Dominican Republic, which is home to hundreds of thousands of Haitian migrants.

Furthermore, the infrastructure has all but collapsed and drug trafficking has corrupted the judicial system and the police.

Haiti is also ill-equipped to deal with the aftermath of the tropical storms that frequently sweep across the island, with severe deforestation having left it vulnerable to flooding. It also lies in a region prone to earthquakes.



Natural disaster struck with full force early in 2010, when the capital Port-au-Prince was hit by a magnitude 7.0 earthquake - the country's worst in 200 years. [an estimated 220,000] people were killed and much of the capital and its wider area devastated, prompting a major international aid effort. Ten months later, with the country still struggling to recover from the earthquake, an outbreak of cholera added to Haiti's woes.

KEY STATS

- ◆ Population: 10.1 million (UN, 2011)
- ◆ Capital: Port-au-Prince
- ◆ Area: 10,714 sq miles (about the size of Maryland)
- ◆ Major languages: Creole, French
- ◆ Major religions: Christianity and Voodoo
- ◆ Life expectancy: 61 years (men), 64 years (women) (UN)
- ◆ Main exports: Light manufactures, coffee, oils, mangoes
- ◆ Gross National Income per capita: \$700 (World Bank, 2011)
- ◆ 88% live on less than \$2 / day -- **67% live on less than \$1 / day**

Source: BBC ©2012



1 in 9 children die before their 5th birthday in Haiti - diarrhea is the leading cause (17%)

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