

# The fault line in Haiti runs straight to France

The earthquake's destruction has been aggravated not by a pact with the Devil, but by the crippling legacy of imperialism

Ben Macintyre

TIMES  
21 JAN 2010



**W**here does the fault lie in Haiti? For geologists, it lies on the line between the North American and Caribbean tectonic plates. For some, the earthquake is evidence of God's wrath: the American evangelist Pat Robertson has even suggested that the horror is recompense for some voodoo pact made with the Devil at Haiti's birth.

More sensible voices point to the procession of despots who have plundered Haiti over the years, depriving it of an effective infrastructure and rendering it uniquely vulnerable to natural disaster. But for many Haitians, the fault lies earlier — with Haiti's colonial experience, the slavers and extortionists of empire who crippled it with debt and permanently stunted the economy. The fault line runs back 200 years, directly to France.

In the 18th century, Haiti was France's imperial jewel, the Pearl of the Caribbean, the largest sugar exporter in the world. Even by colonial standards, the treatment of slaves working the Haitian plantations was truly vile. They died so fast that, at times, France was importing 50,000 slaves a year to keep up the numbers and the profits.

Inspired by the principles of the

French Revolution, in 1791 the slaves rebelled under the leadership of the self-educated slave Toussaint L'Ouverture. After a vicious war, Napoleon's forces were defeated. Haiti declared independence in 1804.

As Haiti struggles with new misfortune, it is worth remembering that noble achievement — this is the only nation to gain independence by a slave-led rebellion, the first black republic, and the second oldest republic in the western hemisphere. Haiti was founded on a demand for liberty from people whose liberty had been stolen: the country itself is a tribute to human resilience and freedom.

France did not forgive the impertinence and loss of earnings: 800 destroyed sugar plantations, 3,000 lost coffee estates. A brutal trade blockade was imposed. Former plantation owners demanded that

## Haiti paid for its freedom, through the nose, for 122 years

Haiti be invaded, its population enslaved once more. Instead, the French State opted to bleed the new black republic white.

In 1825, in return for recognising Haitian independence, France demanded indemnity on a staggering scale: 150 million gold francs, five times the country's annual export revenue. The Royal Ordinance was backed up by 12 French warships with 150 cannon.

The terms were non-negotiable. The fledgling nation acceded, since

it had little choice. Haiti must pay for its freedom, and pay it did, through the nose, for the next 122 years.

Historical accountancy is an inexact business, but the scale of French usury was astonishing. Even when the total indemnity was reduced to 90 million francs, Haiti remained crippled by debt. The country took out loans from US, German and French banks at extortionate rates. To put the cost into perspective, in 1803 France agreed to sell the Louisiana Territory, an area 74 times the size of Haiti, to the US, for 60 million francs.

Weighed down by this financial burden, Haiti was born almost bankrupt. In 1900 some 80 per cent of the national budget was still being swallowed up by debt repayments. Money that might have been spent on building a stable economy went to foreign bankers. To keep workers on the land and extract maximum crop yields to pay the indemnity, Haiti brought in the Rural Code, instituting a division between town and country, between a light-skinned elite and the dark-skinned majority, that still persists.

The debt was not finally paid off until 1947. By then, Haiti's economy was hopelessly distorted, its land deforested, mired in poverty, politically and economically unstable, prey equally to the caprice of nature and the depredations of autocrats. Seven years ago, the Haitian Government demanded restitution from Paris to the tune of nearly \$22 billion (including interest) for the gunboat diplomacy that had helped to make it the poorest country in the western hemisphere.



Toussaint L'Ouverture: the slave who won his nation's freedom

In the wake of last week's earthquake, the effect of which has been so brutally magnified by Haiti's economic fragility, there have been renewed calls for France to honour its moral debt. There is no chance that it will do so. The view from the Élysée is that the case was closed in 1885. In 2004 Jacques Chirac set up a Commission of Reflection under the left-wing philosopher Régis Debray to examine France's historical relations with Haiti: it concluded blandly that the demand for restitution was "non-pertinent in both legal and historical terms".

As Haiti faces social breakdown, government paralysis and death on a shattering scale, the French finance

minister has called for a speeding up of the cancellation of Haiti's debt. This is grim irony: if France had not saddled the country with debt almost from its inception, Haiti would have been far better equipped to cope with nature's spite.

Bernard Kouchner, the French Foreign Minister, is calling for a "reconstruction and development" conference. "It is a chance to get Haiti once and for all out of the curse it seems to have been stuck with for such a long time," President Sarkozy said.

This seems uncomfortably close to Mr Robertson's insulting suggestion that Haitian slaves made a "pact with the Devil" to free themselves from Napoleon's grip. The original curse was economic, not religious, and laid on Haiti by imperial France.

Haiti does not need more words, conferences or commissions of reflection. It needs money, urgently. So far, official donations from France are less than half of those from Britain.

The legacy of colonialism worldwide is a bitter one, but in few countries is there a more direct link between the sins of the past and the horrors of the present. Merely a French acknowledgement that the unfolding catastrophe is partly the consequence of history, and not merely blind fate, would go some way to salving Haiti's wounds.

France does not pay for its history. But imagine what the reaction might be if, the next time you receive an outrageous bill in a French restaurant, you declare that payment is non-pertinent, set up a commission of reflection and walk out.