torture they had committed.

When people tried to protest peacefully, soldiers opened fire. Persons who spoke out against the governing council were arrested, or simply “disappeared.”

The new leaders represented the same groups which had held power all along: wealthy civilians, high-ranking military men, Tontons Macoutes. They did not want to lose their privileges. Above all, they did not want any investigation into past human rights abuses. Haitians began speaking of the new government as “Duvalierism without Duvalier.”

United States support helped keep the governing council in power. Soon after Duvalier’s departure, the U.S. sent tear gas, truncheons and rubber bullets to help the Haitian army “keep order.” The gear was used against unarmed civilians, and Haitians’ anger at the United States grew.

U.S. officials argued that the governing council would hold elections soon. But as the election date neared, it became clear that powerful groups in Haiti did not want voting to take place. Death squads roamed the capital, dumping bodies in the street. Arsonists torched the headquarters of the electoral commission, the company that printed the ballots, and the homes and offices of presidential candidates.

On November 29, 1987—election day—truckloads of soldiers and Tontons Macoutes raced from one polling station to the next, strafing lines of voters with machine gun fire. By 9am, dozens of people lay dead. The election was canceled.

The next two years saw a succession of leaders installed by army-controlled “elections” and coups. The vibrant democratic movement of youth, peasant groups and human rights organizations was forced underground. Many of its members were jailed, or forced to leave the country.

**Lavalas**

One of the few who dared speak out publicly against the regime was Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, parish priest of a small church in one of the capital’s most desperate slums. Father Aristide worked with the poorest Haitians. He founded an orphanage called Lajarni Selavi (The Family Is Life) where homeless boys could study, play and work in a community.

Father Aristide preached fiery sermons about Haiti’s need for a *lavalas*—a cleansing flood to rid the country of corruption and make it new. He talked about the army’s brutality, and about how the rich in Haiti took advantage of the poor. He spoke about how foreign interests had controlled Haiti throughout much of its history.

Aristide’s message angered members of the powerful class. Numerous attempts were made on his life. One Sunday morning in 1988, Aristide’s parishioners were in church singing “Let the Holy Spirit descend on us. We have a mission for Haiti.” Suddenly armed men blasted the church with machine gun fire. At least 13 churchgoers lay dead and 80 were wounded. The church burned to the ground.

Aristide’s message also alienated the top levels of the Catholic hierarchy. A month after the church was attacked, the Vatican ordered Aristide to leave Haiti. In response, Haitians took to the streets in huge demonstrations of support for Aristide. They blocked the road to the airport, and Aristide remained in Haiti.

When the military rulers announced that elections would be held in 1990, Aristide announced his candidacy, calling the campaign Operation Lavalas. He said, “Alone we are weak; together we are strong. All together we are a deluge.” He promised a government based on participation,
history, and justice.

On December 16, 1990, Haitians turned out by the thousands to vote for Lavalas. Aristide won with 67% of the votes—a landslide. A rival candidate backed and financed by the United States, Marc Bazin, received only 13% of the votes. International observer teams pronounced the election free and fair.

Haiti now had a democratically elected president for the first time in its history. He faced a daunting task. Expectations were high: Haitians hoped the new government would quickly dismantle the Duvalierist system, stimulate economic development, and provide everyone in Haiti with a decent quality of life.

In its seven months in office, Aristide’s government made significant progress. It started the process of reforming the army and bringing it under civilian control. The notorious Tontons Macoutes and rural police were reined in. Human rights abuses and street crime dropped dramatically.

The administration attacked government corruption, bloated payrolls and drug running. The economy began to grow again. Aristide quickly gained the confidence of foreign governments, and 15 international donors pledged $500 million in grants and loans for Haiti’s development. Most important of all, the mood in Haiti changed to one of hope. The flow of “boat people” leaving Haiti slowed to a trickle, as Haitians began to see a future in their own country.

The Coup: Starting Again

The 1990 election had installed a popular leader, but it had not changed the underlying structures of the society. Corrupt army officers and wealthy civilians still held the real power. President Aristide’s vow to root out corruption and reform the military challenged the power and privileges of these groups. On Sept. 29, 1991, the army staged a bloody coup d’etat. Aristide was forced into exile.

The military set up a series of puppet regimes to provide a facade of civilian rule. In 1992 Marc Bazin, the U.S. favorite, was installed as prime minister, but the armed forces remained in control.

The military unleashed a reign of terror aimed at silencing and destroying the democratic movement. An estimated 3,000 people were killed in the twelve months after the coup. Gunmen rode through poor communities which were known to support Aristide, firing randomly. The rural police chiefs were installed once again to terrorize the countryside.

Many, fearing for their lives, went into hiding. Resistance to the military regime continues, but largely underground. Public meetings were forbidden and military spies were everywhere, even inside the schools. The dominant mood in Haiti was anger and despair. “With Aristide, we never felt hungry even when we were starving,” explained a Port-au-Prince shantytown resident. “Now we feel hungry after we’ve eaten, because we have lost him.”

Within a month of the coup, refugees began pouring out of Haiti. During the seven months of Aristide’s administration only 1,275 Haitian boat people had been picked up by the U.S. Coast Guard. That number exploded to almost 40,000 in the first 15 months of the military regime. After initially holding the refugees in a makeshift camp, the Bush Administration finally ordered that all Haitians picked up at sea be returned to Haiti. Even
those who feared for their lives in Haiti would be given no chance to state their case for asylum in the United States.

Bush Administration officials wanted the flow of refugees to stop, but they were unwilling to address the cause of the problem—the illegal military regime and human rights abuses in Haiti. The United States joined Latin American countries in imposing a trade embargo on Haiti, but the embargo was weakly enforced, and it failed to persuade the military to give up power. U.S. media have been subject to the influence of public relations firms hired by the de facto government to downplay human rights abuses and discredit President Aristide.

The arrival of the Clinton Administration in January 1993 brought hope to the Haitian people and raised expectations for a quick resolution to the crisis. However, President Clinton broke his campaign promises on Haiti when he adopted the Bush Administration policy of forcibly repatriating Haitian refugees. The administration instituted a naval blockade to intercept and repatriate all Haitians fleeing repression. Furthermore, they joined the international community in pressuring President Aristide to make unilateral concessions to the Haitian military.

On July 3rd, 1993 President Aristide and the military leader, Raoul Cédras signed an accord at Governors Island, New York. The agreement called for Aristide to return to Haiti as President on October 30, 1993. But the agreement was fraught with loopholes and shortcomings. The accord allowed the military to remain in power until October 15 to preside over the transition process. It called for President Aristide to declare an amnesty for the coup leaders; and it called for economic measures that would further impoverish the vast majority of Haitians. Aristide signed this accord under immense international pressure.

Working within the context of the accord, President Aristide named a new Prime Minister and a new government was formed. But the new Prime Minister, Robert Malval, and his new government were unable to govern due to the wave of terror unleashed by the military and its paramilitary forces, known as attachés. Scores of people were killed, including Antoine Izemery, a key Aristide supporter from the business community and Minister of Justice Guy Malary.

The military leaders did not resign on October 15 as they had promised in the Governors Island accord. President Aristide had to remain in exile and Prime Minister Malval resigned in December.

Haitian Military Leaders Trained in the United States

The U.S. Army School of the Americas (S.O.A.) in Fort Benning, Georgia, has been the training ground for some of Haiti's military. One student of the S.O.A. was Haiti's police chief, Major Joseph-Michel Francois. Francois played a key role in the coup that ousted President Aristide.

For more information regarding the U.S. Army School of the Americas, its history, and its role in U.S. foreign policy, contact: S.O.A. Watch, P.O. Box 3330, Columbus, GA 31903, 706-682-5369. They can also provide information about efforts by some members of Congress to cut funds to the S.O.A. because it trains the “worst human rights abusers in the Western Hemisphere.” (Edwards, D-CA.)
President Aristide convened a conference in January of 1994 to address the refugee crisis. The Clinton administration pressed Aristide to change the agenda to focus on power-sharing with pro-military and opposition forces. Military representatives were invited, but none attended.

On February 14, the Clinton administration announced a compromise plan calling for Aristide to once again appoint a new prime minister and name an interim government. Aristide rejected the proposal as pointless, noting that given the high level of repression the appointed government would be in too much danger to function. The Clinton administration blamed the lack of a solution to Haiti’s crisis on Aristide’s intransigence.

Meanwhile, the 40-member Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) criticized the administration for trying to “strong-arm Aristide into accepting a truly unacceptable agreement.” They stated that if the United States really wanted to support democracy in Haiti, the government could vigorously support a more comprehensive trade embargo.

Military repressions continued, including the murder of Jean-Marie Vincent, a priest highly respected for his work with grassroots organiza-

General Cedras, which called for a U.S. military intervention and the scheduled return of President Aristide on October 15, 1994.

The vast majority of Haitians see the restoration of the democratically elected Aristide government as crucial. They believe that other changes must also take place in Haiti. High-ranking officers who were linked to Duvalier, who committed human rights abuses, or who were involved in coup d’états must be replaced. The military must be brought under civilian control. A new national police force, not connected to the army, will have to be formed. Major changes are needed in the judiciary system to sever it from its Duvalierist past. Most important, the economic and political system will need to change so that it addresses the needs of the majority.

Most Haitians, meanwhile, are struggling just to survive in a country where this requires tremendous courage and ingenuity (see Haitian Voices). Hopes for rapid change have died. But Haitians still have a vision of change, of a democratic society that permits a decent life for all its people. Haiti will not know peace until the patterns of the past are broken and this vision becomes a reality.

Photo: © 1993, Charles Kamnaham
Key Dates In Haitian History

pre-1492 Fertile homeland of about one-million Taño Arawak people. The socio-economic system provides food for all.

1492 Christopher Columbus lands and claims the island for Spain. Spanish build settlement of La Navidad.

1492-1550 Arawaks enslaved by Spaniards; forced labor and disease destroy Arawak population.

1520s Spanish first import Africans in slavery.

1629 French buccaneers establish base, leading to French settlement of western Hispaniola.

1697 Treaty of Ryswick divides Hispaniola into St. Domingue (French) and Santo Domingo (Spanish).

1750-90 St. Domingue produces more sugar than any other Caribbean colony, with labor of at least half a million enslaved Africans.

1791 Slave uprising led by Boukman.

1793 Slavery abolished in St. Domingue.

1798 Slave army led by Toussaint Louverture defeats British invasion force.

1802 Napoleon Bonaparte sends French troops to St. Domingue to restore slavery. Toussaint is captured.

1803 Army of former slaves, led by Dessalines, defeats French forces.

1804 Dessalines proclaims Haiti's independence.

1806 Dessalines assassinated.

1807-20 Haiti divided into northern kingdom ruled by Henri Christophe and southern republic governed by Alexandre Petion.

1820 Reunification under Jean-Pierre Boyer.

1838 France recognizes Haitian independence in exchange for large financial indemnity.

1822-44 Haiti occupies Spanish Santo Domingo.

1862 United States recognizes Haiti.

1915 United States occupies Haiti.

1915-19 Charlemagne Peralte leads peasant resistance to occupation; captured and assassinated in 1919.

1934 U.S. occupation withdrawn.

1957 François Duvalier elected president.

1964 Duvalier proclaims himself President-for-Life.

1970-80s Shift from agriculture to assembly industry such as tennis shoes and baseballs. 85% of profit from industry goes to the United States. Efforts to protest low pay and dangerous working conditions are severely repressed.

1971 Francois Duvalier dies after naming his son Jean-Claude as President-for-Life.

1972 First Haitian refugee “boat people” arrive in Florida.

1980 Crackdown on opposition groups; 200 journalists, lawyers and human rights workers arrested.

1981 U.S. and international agencies slaughter pigs in Haiti following outbreak of African swine fever.

1984 Anti-government riots in major Haitian towns.

1985 Soldiers shoot four schoolchildren during protests.


1987 National election. Soldiers and Tontons Macoutes massacre voters; election cancelled.


1990 Haiti successfully holds first democratic elections. Aristide wins with 67% of the popular vote against a well-financed, U.S. backed candidate, Marc Bazin.


September: Army seizes power in coup d'etat; Aristide goes into exile. Severe repression is unleashed against democratic and grass-roots groups. Thousands of refugees begin fleeing Haiti in boats.

October: Organization of American States condemns the coup and calls for a trade embargo.

1992 May: President Bush orders U.S. Coast Guard to intercept all Haitians leaving the island in boats and return them to Haiti.

July: Marc Bazin, who won only 13% of the vote in 1991, is sworn in as prime minister.

September: 50,000 people march in New York to show support for Aristide's return to Haiti.

1993 January: Naval blockade imposed to prevent Haitian refugees from fleeing to the U.S.

July: Governors Island Accord signed between President Aristide and military leader Raoul Cedrás setting Oct 30 as Aristide’s return date.

October 15: General Raoul Cedrás refuses to step down as called for by the Governors Island Accord, delaying restoration of democracy.

1993-94 Many key leaders of the democratic movement are killed, such as Priest Jean-Marie Vincent.

1994 February: US encourages Aristide to agree to a coalition government

July: United Nations Security Council Resolution 940 authorizes the use of “any means necessary to facilitate the departure of the military leadership.”

September 18: The U.S. military intervenes in Haiti.