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Haitians relieved 'to be on the other side'

by Chris Herlinger



A woman walks at a mass grave site in Tituyan, on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Jan. 11. Haitians were decorating and visiting the grave sites of those who perished in last year's Jan. 12 earthquake. (CNS/Jorge Silva, Reuters)

I just missed bumping into Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier at the Port-au-Prince airport on Jan. 16. I was already en route back to New York when he returned from exile and, in an unexpected and stunning move, uprooted Haiti's political landscape. Already friends and colleagues in Haiti tell me that Port-au-Prince is abuzz with rumors. Can a return by former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide be next?

Maybe the move isn't wholly surprising in a country of political uncertainty and jarring and startling contrasts and illuminations. Still, one reason it felt like such a jolt was because in the days before and after the commemorations of the Jan. 12, 2010, earthquake, things had been relatively calm. (Though underline that word "relatively.") My time in Haiti was notable less for high drama than for more subtle moments.

One such moment was watching a procession of Roman Catholic clerics proceeding onto the grounds of Port-au-Prince's devastated cathedral for a prayer service on the morning of the Jan. 12 anniversary. One

cleric, perhaps recalling the death of Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot in the quake, glanced up and stared hard and wistfully at the ruins of a cathedral whose façade is crumbling and, in a few places, looking perilously unanchored.

Then there was the moment a Church World Service colleague told me of seeing a recent headline in a Port-au-Prince newspaper that read: "Just One Day" -- as if Haitians wanted just one day of peace, free from outsiders, visitors, missionaries, humanitarian workers, journalists, bad news in general and the intense (and mostly unflattering) international media glare.

I wasn't surprised to hear that. Haitian and non-Haitian friends and colleagues told me that most Haitians were likely to just stay at home and commemorate Jan. 12 with friends and family. That proved to be true -- I saw far more people on the streets the month after the quake in February than during the one-year commemoration. And occasionally, it felt as if outsiders were intruding on people's grief -- perhaps most glaringly when I saw non-Haitian photographers outside the cathedral, jostling to get photographs of elderly Haitian women lighting candles or praying.

In other ways, it appeared that Haitians were, as one colleague told me, relieved "to be on the other side" of the first year. And indeed, during this, my third visit to Haiti since the earthquake, I more keenly felt the sense of Haitians eager to address long-standing problems and challenges, such as hunger, jobs and poor governance. How Baby Doc's re-appearance changes that, I don't know. But human rights groups and advocates were furious at the news of Baby Doc's visit, and in a stinging reminder of what the Duvaliers did to Haiti, author and Haiti expert Amy Wilentz told the Associated Press: "Let's not forget what Duvalierism was: prison camps, torture, arbitrary arrest, extrajudicial killings, persecution of the opposition." Noting that this was not the moment for upheaval in Haiti, Wilentz told the AP: "Haitians need a steady hand to guide them through the earthquake recovery, not the ministrations of a scion of dictatorship."

If such a steady hand is provided, how will Haiti fare? I'm convinced that a number of non-governmental organizations and networks, many of them with U.S. church ties, are doing good work in Haiti. Whether they are educational and technical training centers in Port-au-Prince, or health clinics and food-coops in rural areas, these groups are trying their level best to end hurtful dynamics and practices -- dependence on outsiders, government inaction -- that have done grievance harm to Haiti. Polycarpe Joseph, a Jesuit-trained community leader who heads the Ecumenical Foundation for Peace and Justice, a group that runs an educational training program for young people in Port-au-Prince, told me: "Without social justice, we will not have peace, and without peace, there is not a future for Haiti."

Of course, there is only so much these groups can do. I asked Josette Pérard, who heads the Lambi Fund of Haiti, another small non-governmental organization, about the greatest threat to Haiti's "food security" -- Haitians having enough to eat. Without hesitation she replied, "climate change." That's a problem that obviously requires attention at the international level but also nationally, from a more proactive, robust and visionary government concerned about Haiti's poor majority -- qualities that, to say the least, were not characteristic of Haiti under Baby Doc or his father, Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier. "The state," Pérard told me in an interview, "has to take more responsibility."

Unfortunately, the Haitian state is essentially an absent and vacant presence in people's lives right now -- which perhaps explains the ease with which a Baby Doc could unexpectedly and suddenly appear unannounced in Port-au-Prince. Haiti's first lady, Elisabeth Débrosse Delatour Préval, attended the memorial service on the cathedral grounds; her husband, President René Préval, did not, presumably out of security concerns. President Préval is not well-liked at the moment. Though credited with staving off possible national chaos during the last year, he's being blamed, fairly or unfairly, for just about everything

else, including Haiti's new problem: a cholera epidemic. Anti-government graffiti I saw summed up the frustrations: Préval = Kolera (Cholera).

Préval's decision not to attend the memorial service was probably wise. Not far from the cathedral my friend and colleague, the photographer and journalist Paul Jeffrey, witnessed a demonstration that ended in a Catholic priest's car being torched. The stunned cleric, his car keys in hand, didn't know how to react when he reached his wrecked vehicle: he was not only greeted by a gutted automobile but by a circle of photographers and reporters. Other demonstrations near the collapsed National Palace -- perhaps the most potent, painful and visible symbol of a paralyzed government -- were more orderly, but they focused on the widespread weariness, impatience and anger with Haitian authorities during the last year.

On the afternoon of the anniversary, Paul and other colleagues and I went to a mass grave in Titanyen, just outside of Port-au-Prince. It's a striking spot, overlooking the deep turquoise-colored waters of the Gulf of Gonâve. It was a remarkably clear day, and from we stood, the capital city was barely visible against the dominating hills and mountains. For a moment, it was possible to see why Haiti was once dubbed "the jewel of the Caribbean" -- the area looked as beautiful as I have ever seen it.

Not many people were at the grave site, which is set up on a hill and is marked by hundreds of simple black crosses placed where tens of thousands are buried.

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Among those at the site was Benjamin Dieufort, one of the truck drivers who drove truckloads of bodies to the burial grounds in the months immediately after the earthquake. Dieufort told me that it required 150 trucks over four months to transport the bodies from Port-au-Prince to Titanyen. "I brought a lot of dead here," he said. Among them: the nephew of Dieufort's wife.

I asked Dieufort how he had coped during the last year. He said he had experienced nightmares in the early days and weeks, but those had passed. For now, Dieufort was simply happy to be among the living.

"It was God," he said, "that gave me the strength to bring the dead here."

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