

Food crisis in Haiti: exposing key problems in the process of stabilisation

Amélie Gauthier
Researcher
Peace and Security Programme, FRIDE

Haiti has been hard hit by the global food crisis, which has culminated in riots all over the country, five people dead, gunshot victims, an attempt to invade the National Palace, and the removal from office of the Prime Minister just weeks ahead of the upcoming International Donor Conference in Port-au-Prince. Major progress had been made during the last year - violence had diminished and the UN peacekeeping operation (MINUSTAH) had reoriented its efforts to focus on state building. It is still too early to evaluate the real impact of the turmoil. With a new government to be sworn in, some observers already say the effects are catastrophic. The impact of a global food shortage in a country already suffering from a profound structural crisis could seriously undermine all achievements made to date by MINUSTAH and the international community.

The dramatic increase in prices of staple foods has been the backdrop for tensions over recent months. Already in February of this year, the population was asking the government for subsidies and assistance to fight the price rises.¹ The government's initial declaration was that it was incapable of responding and was going to take no measures to help the population. This unsympathetic answer was worthy of a no-confidence vote in the parliament on February 28 and days of demonstrations in front of the National Palace in Port-au-Prince. At that time, the question was whether Prime Minister Jacques Édouard Alexis' leadership was being tested or rather his capacity to call on the *ex-chimères* as a show of strength in front of the palace.² The situation was already fragile; government weakness, ongoing ties between government and *chimères*, and an angry and hungry population all contributing to the tensions. What happened at the end of February was the foretelling of the current unrest.

Food demonstrations or gang infiltrated riots?

At the time of writing, major cities in Haiti have been completely paralysed for days. The country is another victim of the global food crisis. According to experts, the causes appear to be a combination of factors: agriculture being replaced by agrofuels, increasing demand by emerging markets, and reductions in rice exports. Haiti is mostly affected by the price rises in food imports; 25 percent to 30 percent of the national budget is spent on importing goods and \$270 million on rice. The estimated 40 percent increase in prices last year has made life even more difficult for the 56 percent of Haitians who are extremely poor, and the 76 percent living on less than \$2 a day.³ The price of transport has increased by 50 percent in the last few

¹ The price of rice has doubled in the last six months. Christie, Michael, "Haiti not descending into instability - minister", Reuters. <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/KH11-7DJ3M5?OpenDocument&rc=2&emid=ACOS-635P2K>. Other sources claim the price of rice has doubled in a week from \$35 to \$70. Gilles, Claude, "La misère , al nouvelle cible", *Le Nouvelliste*, 16 April 2008.

² "L'actualité en question", *Le Nouvelliste*, 26 February 2008. <http://www.lenouvelliste.com/article.php?PublID=1&ArticleID=54698>

³ "Document De Stratégie Nationale Pour La Croissance Et La Réduction De La Pauvreté DSNCRP" (2008-2010). November 2007, Republic of Haiti, <http://www.mpce.gouv.ht/dsncrpfinal.pdf>, p.32.

days; 22 petrol stations have been vandalised, the traditional “tap taps”⁴ are not running. Haiti is suffering from the same food riots hitting others countries such as Egypt, the Philippines, Cameroon, Senegal and Palestine, though it is the only country that has suffered deaths as a result.

It is increasingly questioned whether the demonstrations all over the country are solely related to rise in the cost of living and specifically staple foods. Thousands of demonstrators have taken to the street demanding solutions from the government. Beyond the demonstrations there are several details to which attention should be paid: acts of vandalism and looting against the private sector, use of violence, the death toll and gunshot victims, and aggression towards journalists, all of which serve as a sombre reminder of the days before ex-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was exiled in 2004.

Some observers claim that clandestine Lavalas meetings have been taking place in the last few months, creating cells and preparing for the 2011 elections.⁵ Events surrounding the food price demonstrations have worked in their favour and they have taken advantage of the situation to foment chaos in the country. New protests against MINUSTAH have occurred and its uniformed personnel have been attacked with three Sri Lankan soldiers shot and one Nigerian police officer killed.

President Préval waited days to address the nation, saying “violence will not solve the problem” and further suggesting it would only make matters worst. The population and parliament were manifestly unsatisfied with the government’s handling of the situation leading to the demand by 16 senators (of a 27-member senate) for the resignation of the Prime Minister. Last Saturday April 12 his second chance came to an end and he was removed from office through a no-confidence vote in parliament. Préval’s response has once again been vague and further fuels uncertainty for future political progress.

Unchallenged leadership?

The President has enjoyed strong support from the international community since his election in 2006. The government has been able to establish the conditions for economic growth with positive GDP, while inflation has been curbed. The country is showing satisfying overall macroeconomic results, which has earned him support from international financial institutions and bilateral donors. Until these recent events, reports were optimistic about Haiti’s recovery, though always with a cautionary note.

However, the President’s silence during the worst moments of the riots has raised questions about his commitment to an inclusive recovery of the country. His initial speech had little to offer a hungry and angry population, as he only spoke of long-term solutions and asked civil servants who had been given a 35 percent salary increase this year to share with their “brothers and sisters.” He also blamed the situation on bad economic management over the last 20 years, 17 of which have been governed by Lavalas.⁶ The President avoided talking about riot damage and compensation to the private sector. It was only days later, with renewed upheaval, that Préval finally announced that the government, together with rice importers, would provide a 15 percent subsidy for rice bags. René Préval’s words and actions lack conviction and might appear to mark a return to his former anarcho-populist style.⁷

⁴ Tap-taps are adapted pick-up trucks used for transport and private commuting services.

⁵ According to the UN, it is the criminal gangs that have been reorganising themselves, yet key Lavalas personalities have been seen in the demonstrations. “La fragilité de la situation en Haïti illustre le lien étroit entre stabilité politique et développement, souligne Hédi Annabi devant le Conseil de sécurité”. CS/9292.

⁶ Haïti-manifestations: René Préval, “propositions” et “vérités”, April 2008, <http://www.haitipressnetwork.com/news.cfm?articleID=9878>

⁷ Roc, Nancy, “Haïti: un an après les élections, quel espoir ?”, *La Chronique des Amériques*, May 2007, N°13.

The Government has not focussed on job creation, such issues being absent from the discourse of the national authorities in the last two years. It was only last February when the then Prime Minister Jacques-Édouard Alexis was facing his first motion of no-confidence that he proposed a 400 million gourde package to provide labour-intensive projects. He was very unclear on how he planned to implement these projects, and was criticised for offering too little. The unemployment rate is 62 percent among 15 to 19-year-olds.

The current Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) Hedi Annabi only became head of MINUSTAH in September 2007. He was in New York while the crisis was developing in Haiti. The SRSG has tremendous responsibility in peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes and also receives the full support of the international community. In addition to strategic planning and coordinating, the SRSG is called upon for leadership, mediation and negotiation, playing a key role in political processes. A recent study underlines the UN's overstretching and weakness in that area.⁸

During 2007, the security situation in Haiti improved visibly with increases in the number of police officers and the detentions of over 750 armed gang members. Shantytowns such as Cite Soleil and Martissant were liberated from the stranglehold of armed gangs. The number of kidnappings diminished substantially and a general sense of security returned. However, new waves of kidnapping then hit the capital in January, February and March.⁹ According to the SRSG more emphasis should be put on the security-development nexus, but Haitians still haven't received the dividends of stability.¹⁰

Both the President and the SRSG's leadership have remained unchallenged during this last violent episode, while both have considerable influence to make the process in Haiti succeed or fail, and they have the responsibility to involve the population and the international community in the country's future.

Impact on the stabilisation process

The food crisis is a major setback in the stabilisation process in terms of security, socioeconomic recovery and political process. Beyond the food prices issue, the legitimacy of both the government and the international community has been impaired. In his last report to the Security Council, Hedi Annabi underlines the tensions between the government and parliament and the erosion of public opinion. He also reminds the Security Council that ultimately political progress is incumbent on the Haitians.

The material damage and economic consequences of the riots for the country is disastrous and will affect overall long-term recovery. At the height of the crisis it was estimated that the damage caused by the angry mobs reached \$10 million in one day and the overall paralysis of country during seven days represents an approximate loss of \$100 million to Haiti's already depressed economy. The government is unable to protect private sector assets and investment and is unwilling to take responsibility. The economic situation has been greatly affected by turmoil and will probably keep investors away for some time.

In terms of security, the capacity of the state to deal with angry mobs and rioting is similar to that of 2004, basically nil. The high level of weapon ownership in the country remains a threat

⁸ Bah, Sarjoh., (et al), "Annual Review of Global Peace Operations 2008", a project of the Centre on International Cooperation, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008.

⁹ An average of 30 kidnappings per month has been recorded between December 2007 and March 2008. "La fragilité de la situation en Haïti illustre le lien étroit entre stabilité politique et développement, souligne Hédi Annabi devant le Conseil de sécurité", CS/9292, Report to the Security Council, 5862e.

¹⁰ "La fragilité de la situation en Haïti illustre le lien étroit entre stabilité politique et développement, souligne Hédi Annabi devant le Conseil de sécurité". CS/9292 Report to the Security Council.5862e séance – matin. <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/EGUA-7DHS3V?OpenDocument&rc=2&emid=ACOS-635P2K>

to the population. The Haitian National Police has improved thanks to an increased number of officers and a larger vetted force, but it still needs to be backed up by an international force.¹¹ The PNH has also been criticised for a lack of professionalism in protecting the rights and goods of the population and its overall handling of the situation¹²

A critical situation just weeks before the International Donor Conference

The high level meeting convening multilateral and bilateral donors with the government of Haiti was scheduled to take place on April 24 and 25, but it has now been postponed. Following the elaboration of the National Strategic Document for Growth and Poverty Reduction (2007-2010), an astonishing \$3.9 billion is needed for the implementation of the plan. Stronger emphasis will be put on coordination mechanisms between donors since the totality of the funds pledged has not been disbursed.

Many countries have already reacted to the increase in food prices, either by directly pledging funds, as is the case of France (800,000 euros), or by contributing to multilateral organisations (like Canada through the WFO), importing food (Brazil is flying in 14 tons of emergency aid and food) or through a \$10-million grant to government from the World Bank to help cope with the crisis.¹³ It is uncertain who will benefit from these large disbursements of funds; the peace spoilers, the government or the population who are the real victims of the price rises.

The National Strategy Document on growth and poverty reduction plans to boost the agriculture sector by allocating 10 percent of the total funds and 24 percent of the growth vectors.¹⁴ Investing in agriculture has always been demanded by the Haitian government, due to the dependence of a large part of the rural population on its production and revenues. The international community has never really given great importance to enhancing the productivity of this sector and making it the centre of economic recovery, most probably because the US currently exports 200,000 tons of rice to Haiti. These exports have already undermined local production capacity to the point where Haiti is unable to grow rice to a self sufficient level.¹⁵ Haiti is the fourth largest recipient of US rice exports, after Japan, Mexico and Canada.¹⁶

René Prével still has to propose a new Prime Minister and the government could change. These factors coincide with possible elections on May 18 of one third of the Senate. The Finance Minister claims the food crisis will not affect Haiti's stability, stating "programmes are in place to boost agriculture and create jobs that would generate income and help its people cope with the cost of living".¹⁷ Some Haitians are asking for radical changes to neoliberal economic policies and demanding a reorientation towards social economic policies. The new Prime Minister will most likely reveal the government's orientation.

This violent and costly episode in the stabilisation process has demonstrated key issues for the future of the country. The combination of the high number of weapons remaining in the country, continuing political instability, and weak leadership could spark deadly revolts at any moment.

¹¹ "Around 8,450 police officers are operational. "La fragilité de la situation en Haïti illustre le lien étroit entre stabilité politique et développement, souligne Hédi Annabi devant le Conseil de sécurité". CS/9292 Report to the Security Council 5862e séance – matin.

¹² RNDDH, "Position du RNDDH par rapport aux mouvements de protestation contre la cherté de la vie Déclaration de Pierre Espérance", 09 April 08. http://www.rnddh.org/breve.php3?id_breve=53

¹³ *UN Daily News* from the United Nations News Service, 14 April 2008.

¹⁴ "Document De Stratégie Nationale Pour La Croissance Et La Réduction De La Pauvreté DSNCRP" (2008-2010). November 2007, Republic of Haiti, <http://www.mpcce.gouv.ht/dsnrcrpfinal.pdf>

¹⁵ Haiti produces 90,000 tons of rice, and imports 360,000 tons, it imports 200,000 from the US. "Pas de solution à court terme contre la faim". <http://www.lenouvelliste.com/article.php?PubID=1&ArticleID=56335&PubDate=2008-04-11>

¹⁶ Dobbs, Michael, "Free Market Left Haiti's Rice Growers Behind" *Washington Post Foreign Service*, Thursday, April 13, 2000; Page A01.

¹⁷ Christie, Michael, "Haiti not descending into instability", Interview with *The Miami Herald*, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/KHII-7DJ3M5?OpenDocument&rc=2&emid=ACOS-635P2K>

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Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior
C/ Goya, 5-7 pasaje 2ª - 28001 Madrid - Telf: 91 244 47 40 - Fax: 91 244 47 41 - E-mail : fride@fride.org
www.fride.org