

Moral and political grounds for the UN mission in Haiti

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There are very good reasons why Latin Americans should be concerned about Haiti, the first country after the United States to gain independence in the region in 1804. Amongst others, issues like security, defense, lawlessness, HIV-AIDS, extreme poverty, and illegal arms and drug trafficking are more than sufficient grounds for trying to help the country.

Sadly, in spite of boasting a people rich in culture and tradition, studies put Haiti in a very lowly position in the league table of human development. This is no small matter, a tragedy which should be considered unacceptable in the new millennium, and yet there are probably those who do not consider it reason enough to justify an international presence.

According to American sources, 8 percent of drugs reaching the American market have passed through Haiti, which acts as a stop-off point for traffickers and lacks cross border controls worthy of the name to stymie the trade and its far reaching consequences. Further security concerns in the hemisphere are also touched on by other sources to justify the international presence. Another good argument can be found in the current state of lawlessness in the country, which might negatively influence democracy and stability in the region.

All of this is true. However, we should not help Haiti with energy and enthusiasm merely for those reasons. To look at the international presence purely from the point of view of security in the region amounts to a reductionist view of things. It's not just a question of what's convenient. Many lives have been destroyed and that is something which shouldn't leave us impassive, mere bystanders to a massacre. Several generations of Haitians have only ever known poverty and violence. That reality is more than reason enough to justify our concern and the efforts to do something positive for the people there; the hope they have put in the blue berets, that tomorrow will be a better day, demands a response.

We ought to keep this in mind, because surely it isn't acceptable to look upon globalisation and the ever-widening integration which goes with it as a merely economic or administrative process. The same process also brings us closer together, increasing our fraternity as human beings, and carries with it the obligation to act in solidarity, especially when a country in our own backyard is so seriously afflicted. Besides, in terms of suffering, Haiti's history is already far too long. We live in a time of advanced scientific and technological developments in the hands of people who fail to empathise with predicaments of this kind.

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If we don't do something to help Haiti, then to a certain extent we will be responsible for its tragedy. What's more, I'm completely convinced the extent of that tragedy is bound up with what the United Nations forces can or cannot do there. That's why Haiti should be looked at from a humanitarian standpoint, not just a security one. The country's problems are both profound and complex. Some people think that a situation like Haiti's can be solved by turning up, imposing a democracy, and designing an education system. But that shows a complete lack of understanding of the situation. Still others offer surprising remedies, such as opening the country to tourism and building holiday resorts on the coast, such as can be found in the Dominican Republic.

The problem won't be solved by a silver bullet solution dreamt up in some far away office, much less by intervening to prevent a bloodbath, as the UN Security Council Resolution called for, only to withdraw and let the country disintegrate all over again. We are faced with a very serious situation which goes beyond corruption and endemic violence. If we really want to come up with the answers, we have to shift our focus and accept that will we find a way out of the morass only with the people of Haiti themselves.

A study of the data available on Haiti will most probably lead to erroneous conclusions about what's really going on there. It's a lot harder to see what's happening deep down in society than to see the surface itself. Seeing is a lot more subtle than that; it's about adding up the facts and understanding the causes of the problem.

Situations on the ground as complicated as Haiti's usually give rise to a wave of bad ideas. Some time ago I was talking to a foreign dignitary about how to stem the flow of violence and he said to me: "Look, what you've got to do is go into Cite Soleil (the shanty town), find out where the trouble-makers are and take decisive action, because that's the only possible answer here." I'd just returned from there, and I put my hand in my pocket and brought out a 5.56 millimeter bullet and asked him "Do you think problems are solved with these?" He didn't offer any response. Does any sensible person really believe that 5.56 millimeter bullets are going to solve Haiti's problems? That amounts to understanding nothing at all, and the international civil servant is a good example of somebody who looked, but didn't see.

I sometimes felt during my time in Haiti that certain elements within the corridors of power imagined that, just because I'm a soldier, and a special forces one at that, I and others like me would automatically tend to solve everything with bullets. That doesn't say much about their opinion of soldiers. But, in any case, that's not where the solution lies.

Haiti, the harsh reality

Haiti occupies half of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with the Dominican Republic. The countries are two sides of the same coin; one has been developing steadily, with the kind of problems consistent with its own reality; the other has foundered for too long in a state of chaos and anarchy, along with a whole number of problems which negatively affect its development. Haiti has 8.3 million inhabitants. Deforestation, soil erosion, water shortages, HIV-AIDS, illiteracy and unemployment are amongst its chief problems. The country is divided at the administrative level into ten departments. The land mass is not extensive. 255 kilometers separate the capital and Cap Haitian. However, the journey by car takes nine hours. In the south, Uruguayan soldiers took seven hours to reach Puerto Príncipe from Les Cayes, a distance of only 194 kilometers, due to the bad conditions of the road network. This has an effect not only on the movement of troops, but on the development of the country at large. It is a problem which urgently needs to be tackled. Development is impossible without free and easy movement by land.

People move around mainly on Tap-Taps, vans adorned with religious and other motifs, which fail to comply with the minimum security requirements. In the whole of the capital, only two sets of traffic lights work, while the streets are crowded with stalls selling food and other products, completely lacking in the most basic sanitary conditions.

It's worth highlighting that neither land nor maritime border controls are in place. The reason is simple. The Haitian National Police barely have 10 patrol boats at their disposal to control the nearly 4,000 kilometers of coast and, in any case, at the time of writing they haven't had any petrol for six months. The United Nations provides fuel in the south of the country while the United States does the same in the north.

The situation in terms of terrestrial border controls is even more dramatic, if only because the frontier is located in a low-lying area devoid of any natural impediments. It's easy to move from one country to the other and the presence of the state is limited. Police vigilance from the air is also almost non-existent, in spite of the country being only an hour and a half by plane from Miami and half an hour from Cuba. Sometimes the wreckage of light aircraft supposedly involved in drug trafficking are found without anybody ever knowing where they were heading. In short, the trafficking of arms, munitions and drugs is relatively easy with such porous borders.

Reports from the United Nations Development Programme and the International Crisis Group, amongst others, offer a detailed account of the alarming levels of poverty and destitution in which most of the country lives. The hurricane season (there are around five a year) wreaks havoc in places where sanitary and living conditions are already precarious. When it rains, floods inundate everything. Roads and bridges are frequently impassable throughout the country. In 2005, almost 3,000 people died when a hurricane struck the Gonaives region, immediately to the north of Puerto Príncipe.

The state of the housing stock is deplorable and rubbish is left piled on the streets. It is not uncommon for animals and humans to live in the same space. The population lives mainly from a rudimentary economy which boasts few industries; electricity is found only in some places and at some times, and drinking water simply doesn't exist. The latter concern deserves special attention, because it will almost certainly become a serious problem in the coming years. The country produces very little and basically subsists on foreign currency transfers emigrants send back home.

The international missions in Haiti

An international presence in Haiti is a recurring phenomenon. In the country's recent history, there have been several such missions, as well as interventions by specific countries which have lasted up to several years. However, none seem to have been successful in tackling the root causes of the country's problems. The difference with this latest Mission is that the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (or MINUSTAH) is an eminently Latin American project, even if many other nations, besides the UN itself, have contributed to it. The Mission was headed up by a Chilean, then a Guatemalan; the military commander is Brazilian, his second in command was a Chilean for a spell and is now a Uruguayan and the majority of the contingent is made up of Latin Americans.

This is not a question of pride or chauvinism, quite the opposite, but rather an expression of our commitment to our origins and culture; which is why it can't be just another failed mission. It has to be a success, for the sake of our dead and wounded and, above all, for the people of Haiti who appreciate that people from their own continent, amongst others, are concerned for their well-being.

One of the key issues the UN Mission must deal with in Haiti is security. And to address that, the first thing that is required is an effective police force. The Haiti National Police Force is interesting in that regard, because it amounts to one of the rare state institutions which boasts a presence throughout the whole country. Although this is true more in theory than in practice, given the bankruptcy of the state apparatus in every sense. The police force has around 5,000 men to uphold law and order in a population of 8.3 million people. New York has 30,000 members to do the same job for the same size of population. By the year 2011, it is expected that there will be 14,000 police officers in place, still some way short of the numbers required. On repeated occasions, joint operations have been planned between UN troops and the local police. When the police actually turned up at the appointed time and place, they would often come without pistols, helmets or bulletproof vests, or with little ammunition, which is to say, very badly equipped. In areas where security was particularly a problem, there was no police presence at all.

The police force, which is still in the process of formation, suffers from an evident shortage of equipment. In the same way as the old army, dissolved in 1994 by the then president Aristide, the police force has traditionally intervened in politics in favour of one side or another. This leads one to think that a considerable amount of time will be required before the country is self-reliant in terms of security.

The Director General of the Police has warned that police officers are involved in a large number of Haiti's cases of corruption. I saw for myself that a large part of the population thoroughly distrusts the police. This explains in part why so few allegations against corrupt police officers are made. The judicial system in Haiti accounts for the rest.

But in security terms, an efficient police force is not enough in itself. A workable judicial system which the whole population has equal access to is also very important. Both are conspicuous by their absence at present, and from these shortcomings spring many of Haiti's current security problems.

There are more than 3,000 prisoners in Haiti's jails and 90 percent of them have not been condemned for any crime. They are held in custody as a preventive measure without any

accusation or investigation having been made. The incalculable number of people held in local police stations can also be added to this total. In both cases, basic fundamental human rights are being violated. Responsibility lies with both the weak judicial system and with the police force itself, and the two are often at loggerheads with each other. This explains why we should strongly insist on more than simply a police force to tackle the country's problem of violence.

To say that Haiti's problem is merely one of policing is a serious mistake. One of Haitian society's main needs is that its citizens feel that everybody lives under the rule of law and that their rights are respected, especially by the state. Evidently, a functioning state and a long-term general education programme are required to solve the problem, but long-term thinking is a luxury Haiti can't afford at present.

There is a much deeper, structural matter about the conception of state and society to be addressed. Fully functioning institutions have to be built in line with the reality of the country. To achieve this goal, it's essential to establish a consensus amongst the protagonists involved, and create the necessary conditions for the population to have access to work, education and health care. Besides, exactly what foreign aid is required from the international community ought to be defined. In a situation which has seen so much corruption and inefficiency, the problem is less a lack of resources than their meaningful allocation to the real needs of the people and the projects which will lay the foundations of the country's future.

As for the issue of security, violence should be tackled firmly, with the proviso that force should be applied only after careful consideration, and always within the limits of democratic civil society. If the deep-seated problems are not addressed, of which the violence is merely a manifestation, we will be acting like a doctor who treats the symptoms but not the cause of an illness.

The origins of MINUSTAH

In February 2004, a general state of unrest reached its climax and President Jean-Bertrand Aristide left the country. The underlying origins of this conflict date back to before his time in office, but Aristide's government made the situation significantly worse. The UN Security Council authorised a Multinational Interim Force (or MIF) led by the United States, France, Canada and Chile to be sent to Haiti with the objective of putting an end to the chaos and violence and prevent a bloodbath from ensuing. I believe this was appropriate, despite the fact that some opposed the measure, given the high levels of violence sweeping the country. Without the MIF, it's very probable that a massacre would have taken place.

The force was under the command of General Ronald Coleman, North American, from February through until July 2004, the duration that the MIF lasted. During this period, a slaughter was avoided and some weapons were handed in. Former members of the Haitian Armed Force (Fuerza Armada de Haiti or FAdH), which had been disbanded in 1994, had formed into political groups with alliances or direct links to armed units and other elements to demand the re-establishment of their rights, salaries and pensions.

The break-up of the Armed Force created a serious problem. Apparently, the weapons of the former army were handed out to the population without any kind of control and without establishing a record for their subsequent collection and reassignment. The result meant that weapons disappeared without any kind of paper trail indicating where they might be. After

four months, the UN recognised that the situation was more complex than had been previously thought and exceeded the mandate of MIF. And so on the 1st of June 2004 Resolution 1542 was passed which gave rise to the current International Mission. In July of the same year, General Coleman handed power over to the Brazilian General Augusto Heleno Ribeiro Pereira and so began the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH).

The Resolution called for UN forces to carry out various tasks, besides establishing security and avoiding a massacre. Amongst other things, they included supporting the transitional government and ensuring the smooth running of the elections which would represent Haiti's first step on the road to stability and development with a legitimate authority in power.

Given the difficult security situation, it was often suggested that military operations of a more offensive nature should be carried out. Even the civilian authorities themselves asked us to act decisively. Faced with the escalating number of murders and kidnappings, many were quick to call for a military crackdown.

At such times, it is important to remember the objective. Before beginning the meetings where decisions were taken, we would remind the authorities that certain operations could cause the death of civilians, something which would damage the Mission. Together with General Urano Teixeira Da Matta Bacellar and afterwards with General Elito Carvalho Siqueira, two great military commanders, we insisted that the political process and forthcoming elections risked being gravely undermined, something which would be counter-productive to the Mission's goal. Fortunately, our advice was heeded.

There were times when we were looked upon with scepticism. Yet nobody in charge of a mission should ever confuse tactics with strategy. A tactical success might well turn out to be a strategic disaster, the kind of Pyrrhic victory which Haiti could do without. At the same time, it's always desirable that high ranking figures show a degree of political sensitivity. In this regard, the head of the mission, the Ambassador Juan Gabriel Valdés and latterly his successor, Edmond Mulet, both set an excellent example of leadership and political prudence.

The Mission's structure

And so a mission was fashioned which, strictly speaking, was more political than military. There was no army to defeat, but a UN mandate to be implemented which would smooth the way for a society to live in peace under the rule of law. The organisational structure of the United Nations was reflected in the mandate. Amongst other things, this created two hurdles for the Mission to overcome. First of all, police and military had joint control and command, both sharing security responsibilities between them. For this reason, a good deal of coordinating had to be done. When life or death decisions have to be made in real life security operations, however, joint control and command in a conflict zone is a mistake.

Wherever security operations are carried out, one control and command centre should plan operations and issue orders. The task at hand can be coordinated previously in meetings but when it comes to getting down to business, a single body should lead the operation. The United Nations corrected this mistake after a year and from June 2006 onwards, only one control and command centre functioned during security operations.

Secondly there was no intelligence gathering organisation included in the structure the mandate called for. In such circumstances, it was difficult for the police and army to obtain useful

information. None of the contingent spoke the native language. Many thought that French would be sufficient, but Creole is spoken in Haiti, a mixture of French and West African languages.

It was assumed that the Haitian police force had thorough knowledge of the situation in the country, but the police were either absent, or the information they provided was unreliable. Sometimes there were no data bases or else they were badly put together. Sixteen months into the Mission, in October 2006, the UN created an intelligence analysis centre, the Joint Mission Analysis Cell (JMAC). However, its focus was on analysing information for the leader of the Mission, and it didn't offer much at a military level. The solution that we came up with together with General Elito was to strengthen intelligence gathering from army headquarters, and put our findings at the disposal of the units on the ground.

The military force to date is 6,638 soldiers - although numbers rose to 7,500 when the elections were held - made up of troops from Uruguay, Sri Lanka, Peru, Brazil, Jordan, Uruguay, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile. Previously, there were also contingents from Spain and Morocco but they withdrew in March 2006, something which was surprising, above all because of the timing (only a month after the elections). In addition, administrative duties were carried out by Philippine and Guatemalan contingents.

Who causes insecurity in Haiti?

The February 2006 elections were held under the auspices of MINUSTAH, with the support of the Organisation of American States (Organización de Estados Americanos or the OEA). The military's task was, amongst others, to safeguard the polling stations, transport the ballot boxes in a secure way and to help with the vote count, all of which required considerable effort in terms of logistics and manpower. The electoral process was carried out in conditions of transparency and enjoyed a very high participation, something unusual in the past. For the first time, the Haitian population responded to the ballot paper.

After the elections were over and a new government was formed, many surprisingly felt the mission's objective had been accomplished and that it could be wound up, but they failed to understand that a high level of unrest was still prevalent. The peace and calm was very fragile. The elections were merely the starting point of a process, not its conclusion. The new government's legitimacy would now allow it to act decisively in tackling the country's deep seated problems.

Any analysis of a violent situation ought to differentiate between the perceived reality and reality itself. The perception is that there are hundreds of daily kidnappings, numerous deaths and widespread chaos in the country. According to this perception, the UN Mission is ineffective and has not carried out all its objectives. The reality itself is that the country has been under the control of MINUSTAH since the beginning of the Mission. The violence is centered in two specific areas of the capital, Cite Soleil, and the Martissant sector. During the time I was involved in the Mission, no security situation outside the capital ever caused real concern.

The elections gave rise to a new legitimate government, accepted by the majority of the population. To give credibility to the notion that Haiti is all about violence is like using the most problematic neighbourhood of any American city as a measure of lawlessness in the country at large, or saying that the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro are a faithful reflection of law and order in Brazil.

The international press focused exclusively on what was happening in Cite Soleil and that had a repercussion on what was perceived back home. As the people leading the Mission, however, we had to distinguish very clearly between the two versions of reality in order to take the appropriate decisions. Because a leadership only concerned with reality will lose the war. In a world where the mass media plays such an important role, perceived reality also needs to be addressed in order to avoid the build-up of the kind of pressure which can bring down any organisation. That's why we decided to prioritise the situation in Cite Soleil.

Some ambassadors suggested that the military provide the necessary security conditions after which economic aid could arrive. The maxim is security first, development second. But, as reasonable as it seems, things don't always work out like that in real life, and so it was in Haiti. In all of the areas where the blue berets arrived in 2004 (Puerto Príncipe, Les Cayes, Gonaïves, etcetera) the same process was followed. First of all, the area was made secure and contacts were made with the local population until it began to trust the soldiers and normal life resumed on the streets. Today, there are no cases of serious violence, the atmosphere is calm, and the echo of gunshot is heard much less than before. However, economic aid has not reached those places where security has been established. Paradoxically, in the vast majority of cases, the aid programmes have not been directed at the most stable areas.

Economic aid must arrive as soon as possible, practically at the same time as military intervention. The local population's patience has its limits, and if we give the impression that a mission's aim is only to guarantee law and order while their poverty and problems persist, then we have a serious problem on our hands; a lot of studies, a lot of projects, but little concrete action. The prestigious economist Jeffrey Sachs visited President Preval a day before he was sworn into office in order to make a series of development recommendations. Preval listened with interest and then answered him in the following way:

"When I take power tomorrow, teachers, policemen, and health workers are going to come to see me and they'll say President, pay us our wages. I'm going to put my hand in my pocket, and I'm going to look around in there trying to find a coin, but I don't have any. Projects are needed, sure, but right now I don't have money to pay salaries and make the state work."

During the period of my command, gunfire directed at our troops in the capital and the kidnapping and murder of Haitians were normal everyday problems. The violence worsened in December 2006, coinciding with the regrettable death of General Bacellar. In statistical terms, levels of security decreased and we were suffering 260 kidnappings a month compared to the 60 or so previous average.

Each month we discovered around 20 bodies in the street, victims of lynch mobs or murderers. In one month, we suffered the death of three blue berets at the hands of the gangs besides that of a United Nations policeman (UNPOL). (I paid my last respects to all of them, by the way, without the presence of a single member of the Haitian provisional government, something which certainly annoyed me because I found it unjustifiable and offensive to my soldiers).

All of the violent acts took place in the capital. So, what was the real security problem we were dealing with? First of all, in Haiti there are no armed militias, or opposing armies, nor a national liberation movement. But there are certainly gangs of armed criminals. Some intelligence sources reported that the so-called Dessalines army made up of between 300 - 400 men was active in the northern zone. I inspected the whole area and wondered where they could be

hiding because there were no trees or jungle there. Then I realised that the intelligence reports were merely reflecting rumours from the street, something very typical of Haitian culture. Our security problem was basically one of delinquency, armed gangs in the capital made up of between 20 and 60 men, even if apparently there were others with greater numbers.

The leaders of the armed gangs look like rock stars, although in reality they are anything but. The truth is they are cold-blooded murderers capable, for example, of killing several soldiers as they handed out buckets to the local population for water gathering. In March 2006, one of the gang leaders, Evans Ti Kouto, which means little penknife, captured two policemen and kept them in an area of Cite Soleil under his control. The level of madness and violence of these criminals reaches such extremes that, rather than set them free, they chose to cut them up into pieces, burn them and feed their remains to the dogs. With gangs like these, peaceful solutions are hard to find, but prudence demanded we respect the norms of international law and, especially, the UN's own rules of engagement.

A strategy for Cite Soleil

Puerto Príncipe is a city of almost four million inhabitants. Cite Soleil is a four kilometer shanty town where around 200,000 people live. The reasons for its violent fame and extreme poverty can be found in a lack of investment or any meaningful aid. The Haitian police do not dare enter the area in spite of it being the source of most violent crime. Many of its schools are closed and there is no public hospital. Words such as justice and human rights mean little in a place like this. Paradoxically, Cite Soleil is situated just beside Haiti's richest industrial area.

The gangs kidnap victims in other neighbourhoods of the capital before taking them back to the shanty town. More than 90 percent of the victims are Haitians. Kidnapping is a profitable business, despite the immense poverty of a country where most of the population subsists on an income of two dollars a day. That is explained by the sizeable amounts of money sent back home by immigrants living in Canada and the USA.

The gangs are extremely violent, have long been at loggerheads with each other and will stop at nothing. The two most important gangs were led at the time by Amara in Belekou and by Evans who operates in Boston, both of them areas of Cite Soleil. When MINUSTAH officials asked the Haitian police for their outstanding arrest warrants, they were answered with silence or else were told that they had been "misplaced", which serves as an example of the way justice works in the country.

Troops were deployed throughout the whole of Cite Soleil: blue berets from Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Sri Lanka and Bolivia were deployed in its streets and often came under fire. Although levels of violence have generally dropped, President Preval's plan to force the gangs to abandon their criminal activities was not producing the desired effect. The most wanted delinquents were not going to simply hand themselves over. The majority of them, like Amara, want to secure a passport to America, Canada or Mexico, or any other country which would receive them. But if one gang leader leaves, there are another 20 waiting to take his place. The criminal gangs have an efficient structure which makes entering Cite Soleil especially difficult. In streets where MINUSTAH soldiers were not patrolling, armed gang members strolled around. They had their own sentries posted on rooftops and the neighbourhood was under constant watch; besides, they set traps for the vehicles. All of the houses were inter-connected and gang members used mobile telephones, relatively easy to come by in Haiti, to communicate amongst themselves.

An especially serious problem was that women and children were being used as human shields and it seems that many of them had joined the gangs of their own volition. When a gang was confronted, they used women and children as human shields to protect themselves from any possible military action. Care was always taken to not fall into the trap and open fire and by doing so cause collateral damage, as it is commonly known. That would have gone against the political objective of the Mission.

Instead it was decided to enter Cite Soleil gradually, improving our intelligence and increasing the pressure. At present, the areas of Pele and Simón are under control. Our efforts were focussed on winning the hearts and minds of the local people. To achieve this, Brazilian soldiers cleared roadways inside the shanty town and Chilean engineers did their bit by rebuilding the main school, amongst other improvements carried out. The aim was to re-orientate the support of the decent local people away from the gangs and towards our forces.

The only incident which stirred up the local population, and this is no joke, was Brazil's failure to win the world cup. In Haiti, the love of Brazilian football reaches fever pitch. People walk about in green and canary jerseys and photos of Ronaldinho can be seen on most of the Tap-Taps. But in spite of the efforts of the Brazilian soldiers who brought thousands of football tops and footballs as gifts, Brazil didn't win the tournament. It's quite true, however, that we had few or no security problems during the World Cup, especially when Brazil played.

Territorial battles also rage between the various gangs and often humanitarian aid organisations, which do a fantastic job, blamed soldiers for being responsible for gunfire directed at their facilities. On 7 July 2006, I personally headed up an operation in which we discovered 22 corpses in the Martissant sector, three children and various women amongst them. Investigations concluded that a territorial gangland battle had taken place. Yet at no time did the police appear. Meanwhile, the murderers were looking on nearby, frightening off the locals. This is yet more proof that the problem is an underlying, long-term one, and that indiscriminate use of force will not solve it. In this kind of scenario, it can be counterproductive.

This doesn't mean that the use of violence has to be systematically avoided, but rather it ought to be used only in line with the law and without ever adversely affecting the Mission. If there's nothing else for it but to open fire, then so be it. The one thing the gangs have in abundance is ammunition. And it's impossible to even think about restricting its supply when there are no border controls in place. It also seems self-evident that the gangs rely on finance from some of the 8 percent of drugs entering the American market through Haiti. What's more, some members of the bourgeoisie and the Haitian political class maintain curious relationships with the gangs.

What I recommended to the ambassadors of some important countries was that if they were unable or unwilling to provide troops to MINUSTAH, they could at least look for other ways of cooperating, such as sending ships, providing information about aerial activity over the island, facilitating intelligence reports etc. On one occasion, as I was talking to President Preval, he offered his thoughts about what should be done in terms of the use of soldiers. And I responded:

"Yes, Mr President, you're quite right, but I've got another idea. We need to open the school here, we need to open a hospital, and we need to give people work. And you know what else is really important? We must have a police presence, even just one, because out here there's not so much as a single one. And with the state so entirely absent, frankly it really becomes quite difficult for the blue berets to solve the problem."

The price of using force

The scale of poverty is so overwhelming that it's surprising violent responses aren't more common. The return of extreme violence is a highly worrying prospect if solutions to the country's fundamental problems are not found more quickly. Every time the Mission faced a difficult situation, the army was asked to crack down. That was quite a tall order given the lack of adequate intelligence, the absence of state support and whilst the gangs enjoyed the protection of the local population!

In other words, they wanted us to go to Cite Soleil, surround the area, deploy armoured vehicles, some even suggested the use of naval back-up - I don't what naval back-up they meant - and put an end to the violence.

At times like these we asked ourselves - together with General Bacellar and then with General Elito - is this really how we're going to solve the problem? How many people are going to die in this crackdown? Who's going to pay the price? Who's going to be called in front of the International Tribunal? Are civilian or the military personnel going to be accountable for the operation? And what is most important: is it feasible without the involvement of the Haitian government and other state authorities?

We always knew how to distance ourselves from those cosy, armchair strategists whose advice and requests came cheap because they weren't going to pay the price. Once again, the support of the Ambassador Valdés and subsequently Ambassador Mulet were particularly noteworthy in this regard. Military leaders such as myself completely agreed that a trigger-happy approach would seriously harm the political process, the elections and the next Preval government. With solutions of this kind, the Mission would end in failure; a massacre of innocent lives would leave no man standing, however much the improvement in security might benefit some.

Once more, mistaking the symptoms with the disease only leads to confusion and makes the situation worse. To look and see remains the challenge we face.

The absence of the state

It appears that real justice, democracy and the rule of law exist only in the virtual realm of Haiti. It's probable that an analysis of the legal and electoral systems, amongst others, would show us that good ideas and institutions are of little use if they aren't tailored to meet the needs of day-to-day reality.

The disarmament process is another complex matter. In two years, only 150 weapons have been handed in, a derisory figure. Yet in the context of a lack of security, the police absence and a flawed legal system, it is hardly surprising the local population is reluctant to hand in its weapons. If we were put in the same situation, lived in the same country and city, would we hand over our weapons? Some argue that progress lies in buying the weapons from the criminals, something along the lines of offering 300 American dollars for each weapon. It's a nonsensical idea. In an almost total absence of cross-border controls, it would become a very lucrative and highly chancy business; adding fuel to the fire of the illegal arms trade only to buy back the weapons is plainly absurd. Haiti is a long-term issue and we shouldn't accept easy answers which don't take into account the global context. A partial solution which is not embedded in a general strategy can turn out to be inefficient, and I firmly believe that President Preval is bravely following that same line of reasoning.

Another example which reflects Haiti's deep-seated problems were the municipal and local elections of 3 December 2006. 29,000 candidates stood for office and the total cost of the elections was 14 million dollars, a bill footed by the international community. Ten thousand candidates were elected, all of whom were added to the state pay-roll. In addition, there was a second ballot to complete vacant public posts, as the Constitution calls for. This process was very costly, not just in economic terms, but also in resources and logistics. It seems to make little sense to have an electoral system which demands such a large share of resources, at such a high cost, in a country where poverty is so endemic and where the state can't afford to pay public salaries without foreign aid.

What's really at stake, the crux of the question, is something which Haitian society at large and international organisms should be asking themselves: what kind of a society do we want to create? What kind of structure? What is most fitting for this country? These are the questions which require the greatest thought. The steps taken by President Preval, along with MINUSTAH, are a step towards fleshing them out. The president's intentions are good but it's unquestionable that he needs a lot more help.

The grounds for the Mission

A Mission's troop contingent should always be perceived as legitimate, otherwise all is lost and neither blue berets nor any kind of magic can turn it into a success. These kinds of missions require the collaboration of society at large so that people can see for themselves that the soldiers are acting in benefit of the population and in strict accordance with ethical and legal procedures. The golden rule is winning over the hearts and minds of the local population. The international force should be made up of very well-trained soldiers, with mid-ranking officers working on the ground being particularly important.

To win over the local population, one of the soldiers' main objectives should be humanitarian aid. This can come in the form of the distribution of food, medical assistance, the provision of drinking water, training in the workplace, road building, reconstruction and repairing of schools etc. It is activities like these which have made people feel we're on their side in Haiti. The positive impact has even made itself felt amongst the gangs, causing a problem for their leaders.

MINUSTAH has suffered 14 fatal casualties in its ranks and more than a 100 wounded. The Haitian police have lost more than a hundred men. The international community and Haitian society itself should pay homage to these policemen and recognise them as heroes, something which hasn't happened to date. The first UN mandate had three goals: provide a stable security environment, oversee the respect for human rights and support the political process. These objectives are being met. Their accomplishment ought to give rise to reflection and the expression of further kinds of support which would help tackle the causes of the violence still prevalent today, without ever losing sight of security concerns.

It's difficult to say how long international troops will have to remain in Haiti. But they are necessary, at the very least, until the Haitian police force is properly established, self-reliant and until the wider security threat is completely under control. In the future, perhaps the effort and support of the international community might need to manifest itself in a different way which in turn could lead to a reduction in the number of troops, but at the moment, withdrawal is unthinkable. When people talk about handing over security to the police and relieving soldiers

on the ground, they are persisting with an erroneous idea about the situation in the country and its complex state of affairs. The current threat cannot be neutralized by police officers. The lessons learned on the way should help us improve the work carried out.

At the same time, it's important to bear in mind that military action by itself is not enough in humanitarian operations. Above all, the involvement of other organisms working together, capable of generating political, social, economic and humanitarian activities between them which encourages the participation of society at large, is what is required. Without that participation, all efforts will be in vain.

And of course it's important never to confuse the fever with the illness, which means we must be able to see beyond the surface of things. Knowledge of local history and culture is essential for that and we must avoid facile, quick-fix answers. The words perseverance and intelligent aid spring to mind as watchwords for not getting lost on the way. Along with these things, maintaining the legitimacy of the troops should be a priority, by following the rules of engagement and ensuring that the job is carried out to the letter of the law.

Haiti needs to aim higher. This implies thinking about a new shape of society and the building of a more solid and efficient state apparatus. For that to come about, the involvement of Haitians and support from the international community are fundamental. It's not so much a question of material aid, which is of course necessary, but of a considered intellectual effort which can lead to viable projects for a culturally complex country. It's an idea which calls for a parallel process in which minimum security conditions are assured whilst at the same time work is undertaken to overcome existing structural problems.

President Preval and his government should be supported, but to think that they will solve the crisis by themselves is once more to misunderstand the problem. This is not just a matter of regional security, nor a mere geopolitical matter. It's a highly difficult undertaking which should rally us all to come to the aid of a people who are our cultural cousins, with no aim other than to simply help them.

The number of serious and decent Haitians who are asking us to help them face the challenge is much greater both in quantity and quality than those who unleash violence and wreak anarchy. They have so many hopes vested in us, their needs are of such a magnitude, that I sincerely believe that helping them amounts to a task for every single decent human being and for all the nations in the world which advocate solidarity and unity.

The soldier who takes part in these missions should be versatile, a good policeman, a builder and a social worker amongst other things, but above all, a good fighter, properly instructed and adequately trained, because it is on that basis that we can go forward safe in the knowledge that norms will be obeyed and regulations followed. The military force of the 21st century will surely go on to incorporate some of these facets along with traditional military functions, as has already happened in the Chilean army, and some others.

In spite everything I lived through and had to face, which was a great deal, I know the Mission was worth it for me, for all of our soldiers, and for those still there. The Mission in Haiti is a good deed which deserves our attention both as Latin Americans and as members of the international community. Without our presence, the long dark night in which the people of Haiti have been living will never be illuminated by a flicker of hope, much less see the dawning of a new and better day. The mission renewed my belief that the twenty first century will need many Einsteins, but just as many Don Quixotes.

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