

HAITI'S CRUSHING DEBT BURDEN

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Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land! "When will the new moon be over," you ask, "that we may sell our grain, and the sabbath, that we may market our wheat? skimping the measure, boosting the price, and cheating with dishonest scales! buying the poor with silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals; selling even the sweepings with the wheat!"

The lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, "I will never forget anything they have done."

- Amos 8: 4-7

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and one of the poorest countries in the developing world. Its per capita income -- less than \$ 400 -- is considerably less than one-tenth the Latin American average. About 80 percent of the rural Haitian population live in poverty. Moreover, far from improving, the poverty situation in Haiti has been deteriorating over the past decade.

There is a staggering level of poverty in Haiti. Life expectancy is only 53 years compared to the Latin American average of 69. Less than half of the population is literate. Only about one child in five of secondary-school age actually attends secondary school. Health conditions are poor. Vaccination coverage for children, for example, is only about 25 percent. Only about one-fourth of the population has access to safe water and almost one quarter of the children under five are chronically malnourished. Six percent of the adult population is infected with HIV and there are already more than 160,000 AIDS orphans in the country, with only two doctors for every 10,000 people. The overwhelming majority of the Haitian people live in deplorable conditions of extreme poverty, and Haiti's population continues to grow at a high rate, estimated at almost 200,000 people per year.

Haiti's international debt is estimated at 1.4 billion US dollars and rising. Scheduled debt repayment for 2005 was \$56.3 million. To put this figure into perspective, in 1999 Haiti spent \$4 per person on health and \$5 per person on education, while also spending \$5 per person on debt.

In April, Haiti was added to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's (IMF) list of heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) eligible for debt cancellation. Under harmful economic conditions of the World Bank and IMF's debt relief program, Haiti will not see this relief until December 2009 at the earliest, by which time the country will have made \$220 million in repayments. The current program also excludes cancellation of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) debt which counts for \$470 million, nearly half of the country's debt to international financial institutions. Haiti's debt kills. Instead of being able to invest in education, health care or the environment, Haiti's people are forced to repay a debt they did not incur or benefit from.

Haiti's debt is unjust. Its first centuries-long debt was exacted by the former colonial power, France, to repay slave holders for their losses after Haiti won its independence. In 1825, France offered Haiti official recognition in return for 150 million francs. Having just recovered from a revolution Haiti was bankrupt and so took out a loan from a French bank. This was the beginning of Haiti's long term debt. However, it was estimated by a

critic of the agreement that the wages owed slaves but never paid during the period of 1665 to 1790 was 25 billion francs.

Almost half of Haiti's current debt was accrued under the Duvalier dictatorship and used to finance the Duvalier family's lavish lifestyle and support their 29 year rule, which was notorious for human rights abuses. Rather than use their influence to stop the abuse, international financial institutions kept the money flowing to Haiti's unelected leaders, knowing it was not reaching Haiti's people. When Duvalier left, these organizations chose to hold Haiti's people responsible.

Our faith calls us to pay attention to the world beyond our doorstep. As has been taught to us by the prophets and the New Testament, God stands with the powerless against the powerful. For Amos, the spiritual sin of the economically powerful was that they could lounge on couches, eat lambs from the flock, drink wine from bowls, but "are not grieved over the ruin of their poor neighbors." [Amos 6:4-6]

The 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) passed an overture expressing concern for the people of Haiti. It gave thanks for the life and dignity of all human beings, especially those in conditions of poverty, and called on the members of the Church to pray and advocate for peace, stability, and justice for Haiti and its people. Specifically, the General Assembly requested that the President and Congress address the political and social situation in Haiti with the resources available in our nation and adopt a policy for the empowerment of Haiti's people.

One way Presbyterians can help make a difference for the Haitian people is to contact their Representatives in the House and ask them to co-sponsor a Haiti debt cancellation resolution (H.RES. 888) urging the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Inter-American Bank to cancel Haiti's debt. The resolution was introduced on June 22 by Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA) and currently has 25 cosponsors.