

The Best of Times, or Not

Haiti: As the U.S. intervention nears its end, the capital tells a tale of two cities—ours and theirs

AFTER SIX MONTHS OF U.S. OCCUPATION, Haiti's glass is half full or half empty—depending on whether you are an American or a Haitian. Americans brag that political violence has virtually ended, that the once oppressive army has been largely disbanded, that democratic government is beginning to take hold and that business is picking up. Haitians are grateful for the attention they have received, but many wish the U.S. mandate had gone further. "I don't see any jobs yet; the only people I see working are the foreigners," complains Sylva Joseph, 65, who runs a small soft-drink shop in Port-au-Prince. "I would like to eat more than once or twice a day," says André Gilius, 32, who shines shoes for a living. "Except for the army being gone, things have remained the same," insists Jean Guichard, a 20-year-old slum dweller who wants to go to university but can't afford it. Still, he adds gamely: "I'm slightly optimistic."

'I would like to eat more than once or twice a day,' says a worker

On March 31, with a lot more optimism than that, Bill Clinton plans to declare victory and get out. Attending a ceremony in Port-au-Prince, the president will officially end the U.S. intervention in Haiti and hand over to a United Nations peacekeeping force. Nearly half of its soldiers will be American, as will its commander, but the transition to U.N. status is a powerful symbol of a job well done. Or only half done, if you're a Haitian.

President Jean-Bertrand Aristide maintains that "Haiti is open for business." Last week Strobe Talbott, the deputy secretary of state, and a team of U.S. officials took some 30 American businessmen to Haiti to see for themselves. It wasn't an easy sell, given the collapse of Haiti's infrastructure, its endemic corruption and its 70 percent unemployment rate. But over the next two years, the U.S. Agency for International Development plans to employ 50,000 Haitians on new public-works projects.

Aristide's government made some impressive gestures for the visitors. Illinois businessman Norbert J. Budnick had been waiting three and a half years for Haitian customs to release three vacuum pumps intended for his company's copper mine near the northern city of Gonaïves. Last week they were suddenly released. "Just like that," says Budnick. "The attitude seems to have changed."

But Aristide's government still hasn't set up a mechanism that would allow the most important foreign-aid program, \$1 billion worth of new infrastructure, to get moving. To guard against waste and fraud, donor countries insisted on the creation of a coordinating unit in the prime minister's office. The unit isn't functioning yet. Presidential spokesman Yvon Neptune insists the government is working as fast as it can. "This is an inevitable period of transition," he says.

The government also has been unable to stop a wave of street crime. Just last week gunmen ambushed four buses north of the capital, killing a driver and wounding 14 passengers. Port-au-Prince Mayor Evans Paul, who may run in the presidential election next December, calls for a severe crackdown. So far, however, the U.S.- and Canadian-trained interim police force hasn't had the stomach for anything like that. "The foreign police arrest a thief and then let him go," complains merchant Joseph. "When you arrest a thief, you have to

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