

# Bush tightens noose around Haitians

by Carlos Wesley and Valerie Rush

Flouting U.S. law and international treaties and conventions signed by the United States, President George Bush ordered the Coast Guard to interdict Haitian refugees on the high seas, and return them to Haiti to prevent them from reaching U.S. territory and filing a claim for asylum. The order, issued over Memorial Day weekend, is aimed at the thousands of black Haitians who have been fleeing death by starvation and disease due to the economic embargo decreed by Bush against their country last Oct. 30. The blockade is to force the reinstatement of Jean-Bertrand ("Papa") Aristide, the Pol Pot-like dictator who was ousted from the presidency by the military because of his unconstitutional and undemocratic rule, and his repeated disregard for human rights.

The decree was roundly condemned in the United States and abroad. A coalition of civil and human rights organizations brought suit in federal court in Brooklyn, New York to overturn the policy of hijacking people on the high seas and forcibly returning them to Haiti. Sadako Ogata, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, said that the interdictions violate international law.

## It hurts me more than it hurts you

Bush insisted that he erected his "floating Berlin Wall"—as it was dubbed by a refugee advocate—out of concern for the Haitians fleeing on rickety boats. The interdiction is "necessary to protect the lives of the Haitians, whose boats are not equipped for the 600 mile sea journey," claimed Bush. He said he would "vehemently deny" any imputation of racism for his policy of barring the mainly black Haitians from reaching the U.S., although no other refugees, say Cubans, are being interdicted at sea.

The more severe sanctions against Haiti were intended to punish the "upstart" nation for challenging Bush imperial campaign to impose a new world order—fascism with a democratic face—under U.S. domination, and as a warning to Ibero-American countries. Since the Haitian military ousted Aristide last Sept. 30, there has been an uprising by nationalist military in Venezuela against Carlos Andrés Pérez, Aristide's patron. Then the military in Peru joined President Alberto Fujimori in overturning Washington's "Project Democracy" chessboard, by dissolving Congress and the Supreme Court for impeding the fight against the Shining Path narco-terrorist gang of mass murderers. Growing discontent with Bush's free market, pro-drug, International

Monetary Fund austerity policies could set off similar actions in Argentina, Bolivia, or Brazil.

Bush took other steps, including closing U.S. ports to any vessel trading with Haiti. On May 29, U.S. Customs agents seized the vessel *Dieu Seul Maître* for allegedly breaking the embargo, when it arrived in Miami with a small shipment of Haitian rum. The U.S. is "examining other steps to tighten sanctions against the illegal regime in Port-au-Prince," said Bush. "Our actions are directed at those in Haiti who are opposing a return to democracy, not at the Haitian poor," he stated on May 28.

Aristide, a defrocked priest who became infamous for deploying mobs to "necklace" his rivals—by chopping off their arms, and placing a tire filled with gasoline around their necks and lighting a match—called on Bush and the Organization of American States (OAS) to institute a full-fledged naval blockade to prevent any breach of the embargo, said the June 4 *New York Times*. Aristide, who has threatened that his "Lavalas" mobs will make Haiti "burn like Los Angeles" unless he regains power, wants the sanctions above all to keep fuel from reaching Haiti.

Since the sanctions were first imposed by the U.S. in October under cover of an OAS resolution, more than 36,000 Haitians have taken to the high seas to escape starvation. According to the May 31 *Washington Post*, "The telltale signs of acute malnutrition and rickets, including swollen bellies, orange-tinted hair, and scrawny, malformed limbs" are seen among children everywhere in Haiti. Even last November, when the embargo was first imposed, relief workers were being cited by the *New York Times* observing that people were eating weeds "and what animals usually eat." The majority of Haiti's 6 million people were earning less than \$50 a year—before the embargo was imposed!

Haiti is nearly deforested, with the obvious resultant soil erosion and crop collapse. Marie-France Racette, Haitian director of the international relief agency CARE, noted that Haitians are turning every tree and root they can dig up into charcoal for fuel. She warned, "It's an ecological disaster. This country was already on a collision course with desertification. Before, there was some hope, but now . . . if the situation continues, maybe eight months from now we're going to have another Ethiopia on our hands."

In an attempt to break the impasse, most of Haiti's political forces, including the Army, announced June 2 that they had agreed on former World Bank official Marc Bazin as compromise prime minister, and to have Provisional President Joseph Nerette vacate the presidency. This was to counter an earlier OAS-dictated deal, to name Communist Party boss René Theodore as prime minister, to rule until some undetermined time when conditions would presumably be right for Aristide to return without precipitating a civil war. But the OAS and the Bush administration rejected the Bazin compromise, and with it, dashed hopes of ending the embargo any time soon.