

Demanding Reparations, and Ending Up in Exile

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Constant Méheut, Catherine Porter, Selam Gebrekidan, Matt Apuzzo

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Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

The Ransom

Jean Max Benjamin/Associated Press

Federico Rios for The New York Times

A firebrand Haitian president tried to hold France to account for its years of exploitation. He soon found himself ousted from power.

The shock came midway through the speech.

“Reparation!” boomed Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti’s firebrand president, to the cheers of the farmers, workers and students in the crowd.

The French ambassador sitting on stage hid his alarm behind an awkward smile. He knew Mr. Aristide well enough to expect barbs at Haiti’s former French colonizers and slave masters. But on that day, April 7, 2003, the president suddenly started calling for reparations, a bombshell that became a hallmark of his presidency — and, diplomats now concede, part of his undoing.

“We had to try to defuse it,” the French ambassador, Yves Gaudeul, said of Mr. Aristide’s call for reparations, calling it an “explosive.”

With his remarks, Mr. Aristide tried to excavate a history that remains all but buried in France. Long after Haitians threw off their shackles, beat Napoleon’s forces and won their independence two centuries ago, France came back with warships and an unheard-of demand: that Haitians pay astounding amounts of money to their former slave masters, or face war again.

Haiti became the first and only nation to pay reparations to its former masters and their descendants for generations. According to a New York Times analysis of thousands of pages of archival documents, it shipped the equivalent of hundreds of millions of dollars to France, setting off a cycle of perpetual debt that sapped Haiti’s ability to build a nation for more than 100 years.

Yet to this day, that history is not taught in French schools, and many of the country’s most prominent aristocratic families are unaware that their ancestors kept collecting payments from Haiti’s poorest people — long after the end of slavery.

Mr. Aristide, Haiti’s first democratically elected president after decades of dictatorship, wanted France to do far more than acknowledge its past. He wanted restitution.

“What beautiful schools, universities and hospitals we will be able to build for our children!” he told the crowd. “How much food we will have in abundance!”

The consequences were immediate, and lasting. In interviews, a dozen French and Haitian political figures recounted how a worried France worked quickly and doggedly to stifle Mr. Aristide’s call for reparations before siding with his opponents and collaborating with the United States to remove him from power.

France and the United States have long said that Mr. Aristide’s call for restitution had nothing to do with his ouster, that he had taken an autocratic turn, lost control of the country, and was spirited into exile to prevent Haiti, already heaving with turmoil, from careening into chaos. But France’s ambassador to Haiti at the time, Thierry Burkard, said in an interview that France and the United States had effectively orchestrated “a coup” against Mr. Aristide, and that his abrupt removal was “probably a bit about” his call for reparations from France, too.

“It made our job easier” to dismiss the reparations claims without Mr. Aristide in office, Mr. Burkard noted.

The showdown underscores how, two centuries after France forced Haitians to pay their former slave masters for the liberty they had already won in battle, the effects continue to ripple through the politics of both countries. By calling for restitution, Haiti, a nation born from what historians call the world’s most successful slave rebellion, struck at France’s national identity as a beacon of human rights and threatened to inspire others with historical grievances against France to follow its lead, from the Caribbean to Africa.

“We were very disdainful of Haiti,” Mr. Gaudeul recalled. “What I think we will never forgive Haiti for, deep down, is that it is the country that beat us.”

Even after Mr. Aristide’s removal in 2004, the calls for restitution have continued to reverberate, leading to a stunning concession more than a decade later by François Hollande, France’s president, who referred to the money Haiti was forced to hand over as “the ransom of independence.”

Since then, scholars have increasingly explored the history of Haiti’s payments. Just this past December, at a [conference](#) on the grounds of the French Finance Ministry, one of the most prominent French historians on relations between the two countries, Jean-François Brière, called the payments a form of “meta-slavery” that prevented Haiti from breaking free of France, long after independence.

“All French people are affected” by the nation’s past in Haiti, said Jean-Marc Ayrault, a former French prime minister. Yet, he said, French students don’t learn about it and few officials discuss it.

“It’s never taught,” he said. “It’s never explained.”

\$21,685,135,571.48

Mr. Gaudeul, France's former ambassador to Haiti, wanted to negotiate.

Mr. Aristide's sudden call for restitution was a political hand grenade, he feared, threatening to embarrass France on the world stage and rip apart relations between the two countries.

Yet Mr. Aristide's stance was not unreasonable, he recalled thinking.

"He wasn't wrong to say how much harm it had done to his country," Mr. Gaudeul said of France's history in Haiti, "and to ask France for compensation in turn."

The ambassador said he urged the French government to open discussions with Haiti to help defuse the situation, but was firmly rejected.

"I didn't understand how we could be so stupid," Mr. Gaudeul said.

Mr. Aristide, a polarizing figure who rose to office as a champion of the poor, knew his campaign was contentious and had timed it for maximal impact: He announced his demand on the 200th anniversary of the death of Toussaint Louverture, the Haitian revolutionary leader seized by Napoleon's forces and carted off to prison in France, where he died without trial.

"Why, after 200 years, is Haiti this impoverished?" Mr. Aristide said in a recent interview at his home in a suburb of Haiti's capital. One of the reasons, he said, was the enormous amount of money Haiti had been forced to hand over to France for generations — a heavy burden often called "the independence debt."

Mr. Aristide uncovered this history only after he had already been ousted from office the first time, his aides said, when a military coup deposed him in 1991 and forced him into exile in the United States. He began immersing himself in the growing scholarship on a history that, even as Haiti's president, he knew little about.

After the Americans helped restore him to power, he was re-elected in 2000 and intensified his research. "He would call many times, asking for more information," recalled Dr. Francis Saint-Hubert, a Haitian physician who had studied the links between the abysmal state of public health in Haiti and the money siphoned off by France.

On the bicentennial, Mr. Aristide upped the political ante by declaring the precise amount he said France owed Haiti: \$21,685,135,571.48.

French diplomats and some Haitians mocked the multibillion dollar figure as a misguided publicity stunt by a demagogue trying to maintain his grip on power. A group of 130 Haitian intellectuals denounced the restitution campaign as a "desperate attempt" to distract

attention from the Aristide government's "totalitarian drift, incompetence and corruption." A French Foreign Ministry spokesman said France did not need to take "lessons" from Haiti's leaders.

But a New York Times analysis of the long-term damage done by sending enormous sums to France shows that Haiti's losses may have been surprisingly close to Mr. Aristide's figure.

In fact, his estimate may have even been modest.

The Times scoured thousands of pages of archival government documents to determine how much Haiti sent to France over the course of generations, not just in official payments to former slaveholders, but also for a loan to help pay them. We found that Haiti paid France a total of \$560 million in today's dollars.

But that only begins to account for the loss. With the help of 15 leading economists from around the world, we modeled what might have happened if that money had gone into the Haitian economy, rather than being shipped off to France without getting any goods or services in return.

Our estimates found that over time, the payments to France cost Haiti from \$21 billion to \$115 billion in lost economic growth. Put in perspective, that is anywhere from one to 8 times the size of Haiti's entire economy in 2020.

"We were building a path to the truth," Mr. Aristide said in the interview, without being told the outcome of The Times's analysis.

The French Fight Back

Mr. Aristide's calls for reparations grew bolder. Banners, bumper stickers, government ads and graffiti demanding restitution were plastered around the country.

The government hired Bichot Avocats, a French law firm, and Günther Handl, a professor of international law, to draft legal arguments and find a court where Haiti could press its case, according to hundreds of pages of documents and email exchanges reviewed for the first time by The Times.

The chances of legal success appeared uncertain. But the legwork seemed less about winning at trial than pressuring France.

"As part of this strategy," Mr. Handl wrote in a November 2003 email to Ira Kurzban, an American lawyer who served as counsel for Haiti's government, "Haiti must convey to France" that there are suitable opportunities "for washing France's dirty laundry in public."

France's views soon shifted from disdain to concern, former officials said, especially as Mr. Aristide invited other former colonies to join his fight. It sent a new ambassador to Haiti, Mr. Burkard, who saw the restitution campaign as "a trap" that risked opening the floodgates for

similar demands from former French colonies.

“Algeria can perfectly make claims, as well as most of our colonies,” recalled Mr. Burkard. “There was no end to it. It would have set a precedent that we would have been greatly blamed for.”

France moved swiftly. Soon after Mr. Burkard arrived in Haiti, France’s foreign minister launched a commission headed by a famous philosopher, Régis Debray. The commission was publicly tasked with exploring ways to improve French-Haitian relations. But in private, another mandate was made clear, according to both Mr. Burkard and Mr. Debray: to shift the discussion away from reparations.

Mr. Burkard, now retired, said Mr. Debray was “instructed not to say a word in favor of restitution.”

The commission’s trip to Haiti in December 2003 was tense, according to interviews with six of its members and with several Haitian officials. The group went to a meeting at the Foreign Ministry with armed officers, prompting Mr. Aristide’s team to protest what it saw as intimidation.

“You have not demonstrated anything serious on this subject,” Mr. Debray said, dismissing the restitution request, according to handwritten notes taken by a commission member.

Mr. Debray said in an interview that while he deplored the fact that the history of France’s colonial rule in Haiti had been erased from French memory, he considered the restitution request “some demagoguery for a 7-year-old child.”

Dr. Saint-Hubert, the Haitian physician, who was seated at a conference table during the meeting, said Mr. Debray argued that France owed a moral debt to Haiti — not a financial one.

“What we paid, it wasn’t in morals,” Dr. Saint-Hubert recalled responding. “It was cash. Good solid cash.”

Several members of the French commission told The Times that they saw the Haitian president as corrupt, and worried that any money given to him would be used for personal gain.

Clashes between Mr. Aristide’s supporters and opponents had grown violent, and Mr. Aristide’s government was accused of cracking down on dissent. Human rights groups said his police force and “pro-government thugs” were attacking opponents and the independent press. American officials accused — and later convicted — some members of his administration of drug trafficking.

In its final report, the commission praised Mr. Aristide's adversaries as a hopeful sign of "a civil opposition" that is "ready to assume its civic rights and duties." It hinted that Mr. Aristide might not last in office and discussed "a future interim government." Jacky Dahomay, a French philosopher and commission member, said he "was in favor of Aristide leaving."

In mid-December, Mr. Debray showed up at Mr. Aristide's presidential palace in Port-au-Prince to deliver a warning.

"It smells like trouble for you," Mr. Debray said he had told Mr. Aristide, advising him to leave office to avoid a fate like Salvador Allende's, the Chilean president who died in 1973 as his presidential palace was overrun by the military.

Mr. Debray said in the interview that he had wanted only to help save the president's life, and warned him that the United States planned to depose him. But Mr. Burkard said Mr. Debray had gone "too far," and Mr. Aristide publicly said he had been told to resign.

"The threats were clear and direct: 'Either you resign, or you can be shot!'" Mr. Aristide later said of the meeting.

A Flight to Anywhere

The pilots didn't know where they were going. Neither did Mr. Aristide. The plane circled for hours, the blinds drawn, while French officials scrambled to find a country willing to take him.

It was Feb. 29, 2004, and Mr. Aristide had just been removed from power.

Before dawn, Luis Moreno, a senior American diplomat, had driven through the large gate of the president's walled compound and climbed the steps to the front door, accompanied by security officers from the State Department.

Mr. Moreno had helped Mr. Aristide return to Haiti after the military ousted him a decade earlier. Now, the opposite was happening: Mr. Moreno greeted the president — and asked for his resignation letter.

Minutes later, Mr. Aristide and his wife were taken to the airport, where an American-chartered plane flew them into exile.

"How ironic it was that I was one of the first people to shake his hand when he returned out of exile," Mr. Moreno recalled saying to Mr. Aristide. "And now I was going to be the last one to say goodbye to him."

With the plane in the air, Mr. Burkard said, the French authorities pleaded with the leaders of three African countries to take Mr. Aristide in. All refused. At last, the Central African Republic, a former French colony, agreed. Mr. Aristide stayed there about two weeks before being sent into exile, briefly in Jamaica and then in South Africa, until 2011.

Mr. Aristide called it a kidnapping. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell called that “absolutely baseless, absurd” and, along with France, said the president had left power willingly.

To this day, many French and American officials maintain that Mr. Aristide resigned to prevent the political crisis upending Haiti from escalating into civil war. Armed rebels were closing in on Port-au-Prince. France had publicly urged Mr. Aristide to step down, while the United States had strongly hinted at it.

Mr. Moreno said Mr. Aristide’s departure “was all at his behest” and that he “wanted to avoid a bloodshed.”

But Mr. Aristide’s resignation letter was written in Haitian Creole, and debates over the proper translation continue to this day. Mr. Burkard, the former ambassador at the time, said that the letter was “ambiguous,” and that the wording did not exactly point to a resignation.

He also acknowledged, for the first time, that France and the United States had effectively orchestrated “a coup” against Mr. Aristide by pressuring him to step down and taking him into exile. Another former French ambassador to Haiti, Philippe Selz, a member of the French commission to Haiti, said in an interview that the decision had been made in advance “to extradite the president, to send him away.”

A few weeks after his removal, Gérard Latortue, Haiti’s new Western-backed interim leader, met with President Jacques Chirac of France, walked out of the gilded Élysée Palace in Paris and told reporters that he had dropped the restitution claims. French-Haitian relations needed a new start, he said, after being “negatively affected by all the efforts of the former regime to demand restitution of the independence debt.”

A Silenced History

Looking back, Mr. Gaudeul, the former ambassador, said France’s combative response to the restitution claims had been rooted in its reluctance to reckon with a past that challenged its national narrative as a champion of universal human rights.

“Haiti was really a very bad example” for France, he said.

Much of the nation’s history in Haiti remains distorted, downplayed or forgotten, researchers say. Barely any French textbooks mention that by the late 1780s, Saint-Domingue, the name of Haiti under colonial rule, absorbed 40 percent of the entire trans-Atlantic slave trade, they say. Or that Napoleon, when he tried to reinstate French rule over Haiti in 1803, lost more soldiers there than at Waterloo.

A report published in 2020 by France’s Foundation for the Remembrance of Slavery found that only one in 10 French primary and secondary school students learn about Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian revolution.

As for the history of Haiti's payments to France, it is "not included in the French school curriculum at any level," said Nadia Wainstain, a history teacher who coordinated the foundation's report.

France's education ministry said the report did not account for some of the instruction on Haiti in French middle schools, but it acknowledged that the ministry had never discussed teaching students about the payments to former slaveholders.

Even the descendants of slaveholders who were paid say they have been largely left in the dark.

They include members of Napoleon's family, European royalty and some of France's most famous aristocratic families. Very few of the 31 descendants contacted by The Times said they were aware of this past.

"I didn't know about it," said Louis Baudon de Mony-Pajol, a sixth-generation descendant of Jean-Joseph de Laborde, a banker to King Louis XV who was also one of the biggest slaveholders in Haiti, comparing this history to "a political and social bombshell" threatening to ignite a cultural war.

Emmanuel de la Burgade, a descendant of another slaveholder, said he had discovered the history only while writing a book about his family. When he told his father about it, he remembered him answering, "Don't tell anyone."

Several Laborde descendants said they discovered their family's past while reading the news in 2015 that an antiracism group in France announced it would sue Ernest-Antoine Seillière de Laborde, a rich French businessman, for having profited from the slave trade.

"It was scathing news," said Natalie Balsan, a seventh-generation Laborde descendant. "To know that I was the descendant of a slave owner was quite a slap in the face."

In the late 18th century, Jean-Joseph de Laborde shipped nearly 10,000 Africans to Haiti on his slave ships and enslaved as many as 2,000 people on his plantations there, many of whom died. A village in southwestern Haiti is still named after him.

Laborde lost his plantations during Haiti's slave uprising and was guillotined by French revolutionaries in Paris in 1794. But two of his children, Alexandre and Nathalie, received compensation totaling about \$1.7 million in today's dollars — the biggest payout to a single family, according to a database compiled by Oliver Glied, a German historian.

The lawsuit against his descendant never happened, but it ignited a discussion in the family. Cousins started to exchange emails. Mr. Seillière de Laborde — a former head of France's largest business lobby and an heir to the Wendel family, one of France's richest — consulted several historians to look into the payments to his family.

One historian said the money had most likely been squandered by Alexandre, the son, who died broke. Mr. Seillière de Laborde did not respond to several interview requests made through his family and business associates.

Five Laborde descendants, including Ms. Balsan, said they did not feel responsible for their ancestor's actions. But she supported the restitution claims, saying they were "justified" by the damage suffered. Mr. Baudon de Mony-Pajol, her cousin, disagreed, saying that France did not have to show repentance and that the calls for restitution were part of a "woke culture" coming from the United States.

Romée de Villeneuve Bargemont, 22, another Laborde descendant, said he regretted not having learned this history in school. A 10-volume family biography lies in a cardboard box in his apartment in Paris, the history of the compensation payments occupying barely a few lines.

"France's longstanding policy on history has been more or less to forget," he said.

A Painful Reckoning

Haiti's payments to its former slave masters added up for generations, costing its economy billions of dollars over time, The Times analysis found, and a little-known public bank called the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations collected the vast majority of the money.

But after Haiti's disastrous earthquake in 2010, Didier Le Bret, the French ambassador, said the bank reached out to him to help and, at least partly, make amends: It donated about \$400,000.

A spokesman for the bank said the donation was simply part of its policy to help countries afflicted by humanitarian disaster. But Augustin de Romanet, the bank's director at the time of the donation, told The Times that "there were probably some useful things to do toward Haiti, in view of what had happened in the past."

The bank's discreet gesture, however small, spoke to a broader phenomenon: Mr. Aristide has been out of power since 2004, but his fight has forced a slow, often painful, reckoning in France.

In recent years, famous intellectuals have spoken out in favor of restitution, and academics have increasingly explored the economic and legal aspects of reparations. Last year, France's national public research organization published a database listing compensation paid to French slaveholders, including the ones from Haiti.

Myriam Cottias, who oversaw the database, was a member of the French commission that dismissed Mr. Aristide's calls for restitution two decades ago. But she said that her views had changed, and that reparations should be discussed.

“The debate, yes, it must be raised,” she said.

The French authorities have, at times, shown some willingness to address this past as well. In mid-December, France’s finance ministry hosted, for the first time, an international symposium on the economics of slavery, with conferences focusing specifically on the history of Haiti’s payments to France.

But the public discussion has involved some rhetorical tightrope walking.

In his 2015 speech, Mr. Hollande, France’s president, acknowledged that Haiti’s payments to its former slave masters were sometimes called “the ransom of independence.”

“When I come to Haiti,” he said, “I will, for my part, pay off the debt we have.”

The crowd before him, which included African heads of state and the Haitian president, instantly stood up in applause.

“People cried,” recalled Michaëlle Jean, the former secretary-general of the International Organization of la Francophonie, who attended the speech. “It was immense.”

A few hours later, Mr. Hollande’s aides issued a major caveat: Mr. Hollande was speaking only of a “moral debt” France owed to Haiti, not a financial one. The French government maintains the same position today. (Mr. Hollande declined to comment for this article.)

France’s delicate stance toward Haiti reflects a lingering uncertainty, at times a malaise, over the way to address the country’s colonial and slave-owning past. In 2016, France’s parliament symbolically repealed the 1825 ordinance that required the Haitian payments to former slaveholders — but stopped short of considering any financial restitution.

“One cannot, objectively, present the slightest argument that claims we owe nothing to Haiti,” Christiane Taubira, a justice minister in Mr. Hollande’s government, said in an interview.

Looking back, Mr. Aristide said that his restitution campaign had at least led to French acknowledgments of its past.

“If I hadn’t asked the question in 2003, probably in 2015 François Hollande wouldn’t have admitted to the debt,” he said.

“That was a step,” he said. “It’s not finished.”

Research was contributed by Daphné Anglès and Claire Khelfaoui in Paris, Charles Archin, Harold Isaac, Ricardo Lambert and Gessika Thomas in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and Allison Hannaford from North Bay, Ontario. Photo editing by Craig Allen. Produced by Rumsey Taylor. Additional production by Gray Beltran.