BACKPACKS FULL OF HOPE

EDUARDO ALDUNATE, TRANSLATED BY ALMA FLORES FERNANDEZ WATERLOO, CANADA: THE CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL GOVERNANCE INNOVATION AND WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2010.

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Before the earthquake, it was the political crisis of February 2004 that last thrust Haiti into the international spotlight. The crisis—another marker in a long tradition of permanent instability—was marked by the turbulent events that led to the downfall of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Two years later, presidential elections resulted in the restoration of constitutional order with the victory of René Préval. General Eduardo Aldunate's *Backpacks Full of Hope* (BFH) takes us back to that time, when the Interim Government of Haiti (IGH) partially transferred the state's monopoly of force to an international peacekeeping mission. That mission was the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti—MINUSTAH), under which the Chilean General served as Deputy Field Commander from September 2005 to September 2006. BFH therefore offers a glimpse into a particularly decisive chapter of Haitian history from the perspective of a key international actor and decision maker. Although the account tells us much about the complexities surrounding the mission and the conflicting viewpoints of some of its main protagonists, it ultimately fails to resolve some of the more controversial questions on the role of MINUSTAH during the time of the crisis.

At its height, MINUSTAH consisted of a military force of 7,500 soldiers from 22 different nations during Aldunate's time in Haiti. The mission, which remains active, was originally mandated with supporting the transitional government, aiding the political process, supporting elections, and upholding human rights. It operated under Chapter VII of the UN charter, which authorizes the use of force. As the first UN mission ever to be manned largely by Latin American forces, two Brazilians—Generals Urano Teixeira da Matta Bacellar and Jose Elito Carvalho de Siqueira—served consecutively as field commanders during Aldunate's commission.

The period of Aldunate's command marked the apex of the security crisis that afflicted Haiti in the wake of the events of February 2004. By his own account, the instability was largely limited to the criminal violence that wracked the coastal slum of Cité Soleil, an area of the capital over which the state no longer exercised control. From there, Haiti's gangs—many linked to Aristide's *Fanmi Lavalas* party as well as business leaders and other political forces—trafficked drugs and orchestrated kidnappings of local elites, Haitians with relatives abroad who could afford to pay ransom, and occasionally, international workers.

In the book's twelve short chapters, Aldunate is at his strongest when explaining MINUSTAH's operational difficulties and the many problems of state capacity, from the wholly inadequate judicial system to the lack of social services and a reliable police force. Although the account at times loses its direction and becomes mired in minutia—reading, in

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some places, like an official requisition order—the book reveals much on the challenges faced by modern peacekeeping operations. From the outset, we learn that the MINUSTAH was understaffed and badly equipped to enforce its mandate. Internal communication was hampered by the inability of many officers to speak English, despite it being the mission's official language (and ostensibly a prerequisite for participation). Nor could the mission rely upon the state to supplement its limited capacity and personnel. The poorly trained and highly corrupt National Police Force (PNH) only consisted of about 5,800 officers to serve a population of 8.5 million, and was entirely absent from the most dangerous locations.

In terms of mission structure, the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) created two parallel commands: MINUSTAH and the UN policing mission (UNPOL), both of which exercised operational command over their respective forces. To add to the Byzantine logic of the mission structure, a separate MINUSTAH sector was created with command over Cité Soleil. Together, these structures violated two of the most basic principles of military strategy: unity of command, and centralized control over the main theatre of operations. It should be noted that, at the time, UNPOL was led by a Canadian with whom Aldunate maintained positive working relations. Yet overall, the General is critical of both Canada and the United States for failing to send troops to MINUSTAH and for their fragmented approach to training the PNH.

Despite his frank criticism of several organizational issues of the mission, Aldunate fails to pursue the tough questions concerning the role of MINUSTAH that his own account brings to the fore. These pertain to the central tension of the book: the ongoing conflict between the mission leadership and the IGH over how to deal with the violence in Cité Soleil. Whereas the Latin Americans who led the mission—including Chilean Juan Gabriel Valdés, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General—supported a strategy of incrementally gaining control of the Cité to minimize civilian casualties, the IGH and the business elite called for an escalation in repressive tactics to crush the gangs. The pro-repression camp received external support from at least one important country: at one point in the story, an unnamed Ambassador angrily demands that MINUSTAH conduct a full scale invasion of the slum (it is not unreasonable to assume that Aldunate is referring to the US Ambassador, given the role of the United States in Haiti at this time). According to Aludnate, "the solution seemed so simple from the outside: apply force and develop tourism" (142).

The fact that the government was willing to risk massive civilian casualties, when the gangs were using women and children as human shields calls, into question its commitment to Haiti's poor majority. Aldunate himself repeatedly criticizes the government for refusing to tackle poverty and provide basic services in the Cité. He also denounces the major donors for failing to disburse badly needed aid. This is a noble stance. Yet Aldunate never questions the legitimacy of enforcing order on behalf of the IGH. Worse, he obscures the nature of the social conflict by arguing that "Haiti was facing a situation similar to the one in Rwanda" (21). It does not occur to him to ask who the central actors in the conflict were, given that Haiti was not being torn apart by warring ethnic groups. Despite his best efforts to cast the mission in a favourable light, MINUSTAH ends up looking like the reluctant lackey of a schoolyard bully.

This is by no means Aldunate's intent, who credits MINUSTAH with overseeing the return of democracy and preventing a massacre. The mission leadership is portrayed as heroic, determined, and beyond reproach. Widespread allegations of human rights abuses by MINUSTAH are swept aside. Aludnate himself is depicted as a courageous leader motivated by God, human rights, and the desire to help a sister nation. On many occasions, the General, speaking to his compatriots, laments the media's indifference to the Chilean sacrifice in Haiti. His self-image appears exaggerated and is perhaps partially contrived to dispel allegations that he was once associated with General Pinochet's infamous National Intelligence Operation (DINA). A short chapter devoted to the topic does, in fact, provide a convincing refutation to these allegations that caused a scandal in the Chilean media while Aldunate was on mission.

Many of the weaknesses of Aldunate's account stem from his ahistorical analysis of the situation. Indeed, his reading of Haiti's root problem is paternalistic and lacking in seriousness, given the importance of his position. At one point, it is the failure of Haitians to demand and expect more from their state that constitutes the core problem. Elsewhere, it is the "disease [of] political immaturity" which has prevented the development of the rule of law (104). The international community must therefore teach Haitians to hold the state accountable.

Many scholars have sought to overcome such simplicity by highlighting the shared responsibility of the international community, the economic elite, and the traditional political class in maintaining a highly unequal and dysfunctional social order. The Haitian-American political scientist, Robert Fatton (2007), for instance, provides a sophisticated account of the crisis that deals with the roles of multiple actors—including Aristide's—as does sociologist, Alex Dupuis (2007). Both argue that the manufacturing-assembly model of economic development, promoted by both the elite and much of the international community since the latter days of the Duvalier dictatorship, has failed to address mass unemployment in the urban centres and the poverty of the peasantry in the countryside that provide a breeding ground for crime and insecurity. They also hold the international community accountable for its role in emasculating the state through successive structural adjustment programs rejected by Haiti's majority. Aristide's acquiescence to these plans helped foster discontent against his government as it failed to deliver on social policy.

The political crisis that took hold in 2004 arguably represented the latest attempt by the Haitian elite to advance its interests through force rather than submitting itself to democratic rules, and appealing to the poor through an inclusive development strategy. The tragedy of MINUSTAH was that it ended up legitimating and supporting this process. Although BFH sheds some light on the nature of the IGH, it largely serves as an apologia for a mission whose main function—at least initially—was to bring stability to a country unwilling or unable to secure a minimal social compromise to underpin a viable democratic order. If the international community is ever to succeed in assisting Haiti escape from its historical predicament, it will have to come to terms with its own past.

References

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