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HAITI: ACTIVISTS AND ORGANIZATIONS FROM HAITI AND ITS DIASPORA URGE FRANCE TO ADDRESS ITS COLONIAL PAST IN HAITI ON THE BICENTENARY OF THE “INDEPENDENCE DEBT”

17th of April 2025 marks the 200th anniversary of France imposing on Haiti the obligation to pay compensation for the loss of colonial profits from enslaved labour, known as the “independence debt”. The enduring harmful effects of the “independence debt”, colonialism and enslavement continue to manifest in the political, social, economic, humanitarian and human rights situation in the country until today.¹ France has a duty under international human rights law to provide reparations and address the legacies of colonialism and slavery in Haiti.

The “independence debt” was imposed by France under the threat of violence on 17th April 1825, following Haiti’s declaration of independence,² which made Haiti the first independent “Black Republic” and the first country to abolish slavery in the world.³ The imposed debt amounted to 16 times the size of Haiti’s economy in 1826.⁴ Today, the structural inequalities and human rights crises in Haiti are partly rooted in the historical racial injustices of enslavement and colonialism. These legacies continue to impact the human rights of Haitians today.

“Colonialism, slavery and the slave trade are not a thing of the past, their effects have had long-lasting impact on Haiti. France has a legal obligation under international law to provide reparations and to address the enduring consequences of the double debt, slavery, the slave trade and colonialism. This requires a comprehensive commitment to reparatory justice, including reparations for past injustices, as well as actions to eliminate racial discrimination and inequalities Haitians continue to face today,” said Erika Guevara Rosas, Amnesty International’s Senior Director for Research, Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns.

Amnesty International has shed light on the ongoing human rights and humanitarian crisis in Haiti, which is deeply rooted in persistent and historic economic challenges and political instability. In its recent report ***“I’m a child, why did this happen to me?”: Gangs’ assault on***

¹ Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The aftershock of history*, 2013. Catherine Porter, Constant Méheut, Matt Apuzzo and Selam Gebrekidan, “The ransom. The root of Haiti’s misery: Reparations to enslavers”, 20 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>. International Coalition for People of African Descent, *Analytical mission report to Haiti in August 2023*, 2024, <https://coalitionforpeopleofafrican-descent.org/docs/analytical-mission-report-to-haiti-august-2023/>. Equal Justice Initiative, “Haiti’s forced payments to enslavers cost economy \$21 billion, the New York Times found”, 13 June 2022, <https://eji.org/news/haitis-forced-payments-to-enslavers-cost-economy-21-billion-the-new-york-times-found/>. Hyeyoon Choi, “How colonial-era debt helped shape Haiti’s poverty and political unrest”, 24 July 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/colonial-era-debt-helped-shape-haitis-poverty-political/story?id=78851735>. Harold Isaac, “Held to ransom: Haiti’s cycle of violence”, 1 May 2024, <https://newint.org/debt/2024/held-ransom-haitis-cycle-violence>. Francisco de Zárate, “Haiti, an economy condemned by a 19th-century debt”, 3 April 2024, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-04-03/haiti-an-economy-condemned-by-a-19th-century-debt.html>. Amnesty International, “Haiti: severe crisis calls for lasting solutions, not impunity”, 10 May 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr36/8036/2024/en/>.

² Catherine Porter, Constant Méheut, Matt Apuzzo and Selam Gebrekidan, “The ransom. The root of Haiti’s misery: Reparations to enslavers”, 20 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>.

³ Kersuze Simeon-Jones, “Racial politics in Haiti”, 28 February 2020, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1713>. Frantz Derenoncourt, *Haiti: The first Black republic*, 2016.

⁴ The New York Times, “Historical data on Haiti’s debt”, calculations made by Amnesty International, <https://github.com/nytimes/haiti-debt>.

childhood in Haiti, Amnesty International documented the impact of gang violence and the political and humanitarian crisis on children. This includes issues such as recruitment into gangs, rape and other forms of sexual violence, abductions, and killings and injuries.⁵ The organization has urged both Haitian authorities and the international community to step up their efforts, as Haiti requires urgent and sustainable assistance to protect children and to prevent further cycles of violence.

Haitians continue to face serious human rights violations and abuses beyond the country's borders when they flee to seek refuge in several countries across the Americas region.⁶ For instance, Haitian migrants and asylum seekers have been subjected to arbitrary detention and race-based torture at the US-Mexico border in the **United States**.⁷ In the **Dominican Republic**, thousands of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent have been subjected to collective expulsions, racial profiling and discrimination through the implementation of racist migration policies.⁸

This week, on the bicentenary of the imposition of the “independence debt”, activists and organizations from Haiti and its diaspora, including the KAAD (Haitian Afro-descendant Collective for Justice and Reparation), which was formed during the Third Session of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent in April 2024,⁹ are coming together at the Fourth Session of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent between 14 and 17 April 2025. They are urging the French government to address the legacies of its colonial past and provide reparations, including redressing the long-lasting impacts of the imposition of the “independence debt”.

“The primary source of the current crisis in Haiti is chronic poverty, the social inequalities accumulated and reproduced during two centuries of suffocation of our economy by neocolonialism, which has always put us on the wrong side. Haiti's sovereignty remains fragile as its internal politics are also linked to years of foreign political interference and economic marginalization,” said Rodolphe Mathurin, coordinator of the Kolektif Ayisyen Afwodesandan (KAAD).

“Our fight today for justice and reparations against the ransom suffered by Haiti is part of a greater struggle. Against the colonial, therefore civilizational, order that has prevailed for more than five centuries in the Americas and Africa; our ancestors, by leading the fight for the freedom and independence of the country, Haiti, broke this order by providing all the value of the axiom “Tout Moun Se Moun” (“Everyone is someone”)”, said Mathurin.

“Haiti's catastrophic crises are the result of two centuries of racist policies by foreign powers, including the independence debt, that have prevented Haitians from establishing a stable, prosperous country,” said Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti Staff Attorney Kristina Fried. “Those same foreign powers continue to suppress Haiti's sovereignty and prevent reparatory justice today. But just as Haiti won its freedom, against all odds, in 1804 and

⁵ Amnesty International, *Haiti: “I’m a Child, Why Did This Happen to Me?”: Gangs’ Assault on Childhood in Haiti* (Index: AMR 36/8875/2025), 12 February 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr36/8875/2025/en/>.

⁶ Amnesty International, “Americas: States must end racist treatment of Haitian asylum seekers”, 20 June 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/06/end-racist-treatment-haitian-asylum-seekers/>. Amnesty International, “Haiti: Not safe anywhere: Haitians on the move need urgent international protection”, 28 October 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr36/4920/2021/en/>. Amnesty International, “Americas: Open letter to the president of Peru and the president of Chile regarding the protection crisis at the border”, 4 May 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/es/documents/amr01/6744/2023/en/>.

⁷ Amnesty International, “They did not treat us like people” Race and migration-related torture and other ill-treatment of Haitians seeking safety in the USA (Index: AMR 36/5973/20220), 22 September 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr36/5973/2022/en/>.

⁸ Amnesty International, “Dominican Republic: Open letter: Dominican authorities must respect the human rights of Haitians on the move, Dominicans of Haitian descent and activists”, 2 April 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr27/7897/2024/en/>.

⁹ Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, “BAI and IJDH advocacy at the Third Session of the UN Permanent Forum on People of African descent”, 30 April 2024, <https://www.ijdh.org/2024/04/updates/bai-and-ijdh-advocacy-at-the-third-session-of-the-un-permanent-forum-on-people-of-african-descent/>. Haiti Libre, “In Geneva, Haiti calls for help from the UN for the restitution by France of the independence debt”, 24 April 2024, <https://www.haitilibre.com/en/news-42185-haiti-flashin-geneva-haiti-calls-for-help-from-the-un-for-the-restitution-by-france-of-the-independence-debt.html>.

opened the door to Black liberation everywhere, it can win again today. Today, too, Haiti, with its uniquely strong legal claim for restitution, has the potential to unlock the door to reparations for all people harmed by enslavement and colonialism.”

The way forward

The **Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti**, its Haiti-based sister organization the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (“Office of International Lawyers”), and Haitian partners Mouvement de Liberté, d’Égalité des Haïtiens pour la Fraternité (“Movement for the Freedom and Equality of Haitians for Fraternity”), Étude et action pour les droits de l’homme (“Study and Action for Human Rights”), Sant Karl Levêque (“Karl Levêque Center”), and Ensemble des Citoyens Compétents à la Recherche de l’Égalité des Droits de l’Homme en Haïti (“Group of Competent Citizens seeking Equality for Human Rights in Haiti”) – with the support of over 200 Haitian and allied activists and organizations – have proposed an **8 Point Framework** advocating for the restitution of the debt. It is crucial that any reparation processes place affected communities at the centre, recognizing the ongoing harms of these historical injustices.

States that engaged in and profited from these historical wrongs and injustices have a duty under international human rights law to provide reparations. This responsibility includes dismantling or transforming contemporary structures of racial discrimination which have their roots in enslavement and colonialism. Such structures contribute to the unequal distribution of power and wealth globally, and hinder Haiti's ability to achieve economic independence and develop lasting solutions based on the respect for human rights and guarantee sustainable stability. Furthermore, States that profited from colonialism and slavery, such as France, must also implement the necessary fiscal policies through their national governments and in cooperation with international financial institutions. They must provide reparatory funds and international aid to ensure that countries like Haiti have adequate resources to invest in public goods, secure effective access to economic and social rights, and reduce extreme poverty.

Background

Haiti was colonized by France in 1697. The enslavement of Africans and people of African descent was at the centre of France's colonial project, and the country profited immensely from the forced labour of enslaved Africans and people of African descent who worked on vast plantations.¹⁰ Saint-Domingue (as Haiti was called) became the wealthiest colony in the world by the 18th century, generating massive profits for France.¹¹ The brutal system of chattel slavery led to widespread resistance from the enslaved people, and in 1791, the Haitian Revolution erupted when enslaved Africans and people of African descent rose up against French colonial rule. They eventually declared Haiti's independence on 1 January 1804.¹² France and other countries refused to recognise Haiti's independence.

On 17th April 1825, France coerced Haiti into accepting a debt totalling 150 million francs as compensation for white enslavers for their loss of colonial profits from the lives and labour

¹⁰ Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The aftershock of history*, 2013. Alex Dupuy, “French Merchant Capital and Slavery in Saint-Domingue”, 1985, *Latin American Perspectives*, Volume 12, Issue 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2633905>.

¹¹ Robin Blackburn, “Haiti, slavery, and the age of the democratic revolution”, October 2006, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Volume 63, Issue 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4491574>. Franklin W. Knight, “The Haitian Revolution”, 2000, *The American Historical Review*, Volume 105, Issue 1, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/105.1.103>. Per Lindskog, “From Saint-Domingue to Haiti: Some consequences of European colonisation on the physical environment of Hispaniola”, 1998, *Caribbean Geography*, Volume 9, Issue 2.

¹² Billy Wellman, *The Haitian revolution: An enthralling tale of resistance, freedom, and the birth of a nation*, 2024. David Nicholls, “Haiti: Race, slavery and independence (1804 – 1825)” in Leonie Archer, *Slavery and other forms of unfree labour*, 1988, 1st edition.

of enslaved Africans and their descendants, known as the “independence debt”.¹³ This debt was imposed under the threat of another military invasion and as a condition for recognition of Haiti’s independence, with France issuing an ultimatum and sending an armada consisting of around 11 warships equipped with hundreds of cannons.¹⁴ With the first instalment alone nearly six times the government’s total revenue that year,¹⁵ Haiti was then forced to take out loans from French banks at exorbitant interest rates in order to make payments, further increasing the debt over time.¹⁶ Today, various estimates place the equivalent of the total payments made by Haiti at around 560 million US dollars.¹⁷ It took Haiti 122 years to fully repay the so-called “double debt”.

The independence of Haiti was declared over 221 years ago, but the legacies of the “double debt”, colonialism, enslavement and subsequent and ongoing harms persist today. These include economic and political unilateral decisions by foreign countries like the imposition of a trade embargo by France and the United States, and the United States’ occupation of Haiti between 1915 to 1934.¹⁸

The “independence debt” burden, alongside other root causes, severely affected Haiti’s economy and development. Haiti was spending 80 percent of its national budget on foreign debt repayment by 1900.¹⁹ Experts estimate that if the full amount paid by Haiti had remained in the country and grown at its historical economic rate, it would have added around 21 billion US dollars to Haiti’s economy over the past two centuries.²⁰

Claims for reparations for Haiti have been made over many years by various actors. One of the most notable examples was former President of Haiti Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s demand for restitution from France in 2003.²¹ In recent years, the Haitian government has requested the French government to provide reparations in multiple forums. For example, a former president of the Transitional Presidential Council (TPC) of Haiti urged France to provide reparations during his speech before the United Nations General Assembly in September of 2024.²² During the commemoration of Haiti’s 221st anniversary of independence on 1 January 2025, the TPC requested France to provide reparations for the debt imposed after Haiti’s independence.²³ Furthermore, in February 2025, the heads of government of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) states agreed to advocate for reparations considering the bicentenary of the imposition of the “independence debt” on Haiti in 1825.²⁴

¹³ Catherine Porter, Constant Méheut, Matt Apuzzo and Selam Gebrekidan, “The ransom. The root of Haiti’s misery: Reparations to enslavers”, 20 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>.

¹⁴ Rodney Coates, *Critical race theory and the search for truth*, 2024. Catherine Porter, Constant Méheut, Matt Apuzzo and Selam Gebrekidan, “The ransom. The root of Haiti’s misery: Reparations to enslavers”, 20 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>.

¹⁵ Catherine Porter, Constant Méheut, Matt Apuzzo and Selam Gebrekidan, “The ransom. The root of Haiti’s misery: Reparations to enslavers”, 20 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>.

¹⁶ Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The aftershock of history*, 2013. Mandy Boltax, Thomas Boulger and Tyler Miller, “The Haitian Independence Debt: A Case for Restitution”, 5 March 2021, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3798802>. Liliana Obregón, “Empire, racial capitalism and international law: the case of manumitted Haiti and the recognition debt”, 2018, *Leiden Journal of International Law*, Volume 31, Issue 3, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0922156518000225>.

¹⁷ Catherine Porter, Constant Méheut, Matt Apuzzo and Selam Gebrekidan, “The ransom. The root of Haiti’s misery: Reparations to enslavers”, 20 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>.

¹⁸ Claudette Antoine Werleigh, “The use of sanctions in Haiti: Assessing the economic realities” in David Cortright, *Economic sanctions: panacea or peacebuilding in a post-cold war world?*, 1995. Donald R. Hickey, “America’s response to the slave revolt in Haiti, 1791-1806”, 1982, *Journal of the Early Republic*, Volume 2, Issue 4. Simon Henochsberg, “Public debt and slavery: the case of Haiti (1760-1915)”, 2016, *Paris School of Economics*. Douglas E. Matthews, “Economic sanctions and economic strategies: Toward Haiti’s integration into the world economy”, 1994, *St. Thomas Law Review*, Volume 6, Issue 281.

¹⁹ Richard Kim, “The nation: Haiti’s recovery, a repeated tragedy”, 18 January 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122693853/the-nation-haitis-recovery-a-repeated-tragedy>.

²⁰ Catherine Porter, Constant Méheut, Matt Apuzzo and Selam Gebrekidan, “The ransom. The root of Haiti’s misery: Reparations to enslavers”, 20 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>.

²¹ The New York Times, “Demanding reparations and ending up in exile”, 20 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-aristide-reparations-france.html>.

²² Jacqueline Charles, “Haiti leader makes case for reparations during UN appeal for help with gang violence”, 26 September 2024, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/haiti/article293089364.html>.

²³ Bert Wilkinson, “Haitian president demands reparations from France”, 9 January 2024, <https://repaircampaign.org/reparations-today/haitian-president-demands-reparations-from-france/>.

²⁴ CARICOM, “Communique: Forty-eight (48th) regular meeting of the conference of heads of government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)”, 28 February 2025, <https://caricom.org/communique-48th-regular-meeting-of-the-conference-of-heads-of-government-of-the-caribbean-community-caricom-barbados/>.