

HAITI-FRANCE - France Urged to Pay \$40 Billion in Reparations for “Independence Debt”

Amy Goodman, Vox Sambou & Jean Saint-Vil, Democracy Now

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August 17, 2010 - [Democracy Now](#) - According to the UN-sponsored Haiti Reconstruction Fund, only two countries—Brazil and Estonia—have fully paid the pledged amount. The United States, France, Canada and many others have failed to send their pledged aid. A recent review by CNN found that just two percent of total pledges have been delivered to Haiti. Calls are now growing for another form of payment to Haiti: reparations. This week, a group of prominent academics and activists published an open letter calling on France to repay an "independence debt" it imposed nearly 200 years ago after Haiti successfully won independence from France. Haiti was forced to pay France around 90 million gold francs up until World War II, which after interest and inflation is valued today at up to \$40 billion.

Guests:

- **Vox Sambou**, Montreal-based Haitian hip-hop artist. His website is www.VoxSambou.com.
- **Jean Saint-Vil**, Ottawa-based Haitian writer and activist. His website is www.GodIsNotWhite.com.

Amy Goodman: That's Vox Sambou, and we are joined by the hip-hop artist in Montreal. His website is voxambou.com. And joining us, as well, from Ottawa, is Jean Saint-Vil. He is a Haitian writer and activist. His website is godisnotwhite.com.

Let's begin with Vox Sambou. You're just back from Haiti. Describe what's happening there and outside of Port-au-Prince, as well, where you come from.

Vox Sambou: Good morning.

When I first arrived in Haiti, I was so shocked. First of all, the airport, it was like completely chaotic. I spent like several hours, just before receiving my bag, and took a little plane to go to Cap-Haïtien. And the first thing I saw, it was extremely, extremely crowded. You can tell there's a lot more people in the city. It takes me like an hour and fifteen minutes just to go to my hometown, Limbé, which is like twenty-seven kilometers. The roads are extremely bad.

And once I arrived in Limbé, you see so many young kids on the street, like begging for money, begging for food, and older also. And they become a bit more—very frustrated, when they pass in front of the house asking for food, asking my mom. When my mom decided to say, “OK, we don't have right now,” people, they get a bit more aggressive, because there is no—the government haven't reached the people at all. There's a sense of frustration.

Just a few weeks just before I arrived in Haiti, the people of Limbé, they have burned the only tribunal that is there and then a government office. And they are very frustrated because there is no information. They've been waiting for forever. Like, imagine in Port-au-Prince, with all the help being there, and people are still frustrated. Can you imagine, like, in the north side of Haiti right now, in Cap-Haïtien? Everybody is worrying about the next earthquake. That's the sense of people I speak with. They feel that the earthquake going to hit Cap-Haïtien. They don't feel prepared. There's no measure of prevention. If you're

looking at Barrière-Bouteilles in the entrance of Cap-Haïtien, you're looking at [inaudible] in the mountain, you see all the houses there. They're super-crowded. And you feel like if you just punch it with your hand, it's going to fall. So, there's a lot of, a lot of frustration on the ground.

Sharif Abdel Kouddous: And Jean Saint-Vil, the issue of funding right now? It's been seven months since the earthquake. A recent review found that only two percent of the pledged money has actually been delivered. And now, this is coming with this call by a group of academics and thinkers calling on France to repay the—what they're calling the “independence debt” that was imposed nearly 200 years ago. Can you give us a history lesson of what happened once Haiti won independence from France?

Jean Saint-Vil: Yes. Of course, Haiti was fighting against racial slavery from the time that the Africans landed in 1499. And when the independence was won, France was obliged to accept the reality, and it's in that same year, in 1803, that France actually sold Louisiana to the United States for \$15 million US, realizing that Napoleon would not be able to build its empire in the Americas. So, that condition, the condition of the wars that were taking place in Europe at the time, made it difficult for France to continue that war. But in 1825, the war between Britain and France ended, and so they ganged up on Haiti.

And the French government arrived with fifteen warships and demanded that the Haitians pay them reparations for the loss of property. That is my great-grandparents. And so—and they estimated that it was 150 million francs, which was, at the time, the annual budget of France. And Haiti paid that ransom up to 1947. And in order to do that, they had to close public schools, cut most of our forests, in order to generate revenue to send that money to France. So, for the longest time, one out of eight French persons lived off this money that Haiti was providing to the French budget directly. So, it's not surprising that there is no infrastructure that was ever built on the western side of the island. You don't find one tunnel in the whole western side of the island of Haiti. And on top of that—

Amy Goodman: Jean Saint-Vil, I wanted to interrupt for one minute—

Jean Saint-Vil: Yes.

Amy Goodman: —just to play the call for reparations from France that came one month after a group of Montreal-based activists pulled off a hoax declaring that France had decided to pay up. In a video falsely attributed to the French Foreign Ministry, an actor posing as a French government spokesperson said Haiti would be giving back the billions of dollars that France took.

Faux French Foreign Minister: [translated] France is repaying the historic debt of 90 million gold francs Haiti paid to France following the former's independence at the dawn of the nineteenth century. For too long, Haiti has been saddled with the burden of foreign debt, debt that has just added to natural catastrophes to block this country's development over the past decades. The disaster that has befallen the Haitian people is clearly not merely the result of January's earthquake. It is in part the result of long-term economic and social policies.

Amy Goodman: So, there you have it, the video that went out that declared that France had decided to pay up, falsely attributed to the French Foreign Ministry. Jean Saint-Vil, take it from there. The significance of this—well, really a kind of parody in a kind of Yes Men-like approach to dealing with this issue that is a mass crisis right now, the lack of money that Haiti has?

Jean Saint-Vil: Yes. And, you know, I have to take my hats off to this organization for putting this out, because the restitution demand is old. The Haitian Emperor Soulouque, in 1853, decided that he's not going to pay. And then they sent another set of gunboats with guns to destroy the National Palace. 1877, Haitians again stood up and said “no.”

And in the more recent period, in 1999, when President Préval was going to the Francophonie ceremony in Moncton, Canada, we challenged him to raise that issue with the French president at the time, Jacques Chirac. President Préval got scared and did not raise the issue. And as you know, in 2003, President Aristide, on April 7th, the anniversary of the death of Toussaint L'Ouverture, in the presence of Danny

Glover and other people who were there, they raised the restitution demand. And, as you all know, less than a couple of years—one year later, the French ganged up with the Americans and the Canadians, and they kidnapped the president and dumped him in Central African Republic.

And so, this demand that just came out is proving that the restitution demand is not something that belongs to a set of Haitians. It's generation after generation that Haitians and people of conscience are going to rise up to demand that the billions that are required to build the infrastructure of Haiti be restored to that nation. And it's just a matter of justice. In 2004, when we published the restitution petition with the Haitian Lawyers Leadership Network, that's what we did. We made an open call to the people of France, because my personal experience has been that most people who are from France, such as people where I work, did not know that history. And when they find out, they also join that restitution demand. So, in 2005, we presented the restitution document to the French embassy right here in Ottawa.

Sharif Abdel Kouddous: And Jean Saint-Vil, I wanted to ask you about the legislative and presidential elections that are coming up this year. The Provisional Election Council has reiterated its 2009 decision to ban the Lavalas Party, the party of the ousted president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. You were in South Africa recently, where you met with him. Talk about this ban of the Lavalas Party and what Aristide is saying right now.

Jean Saint-Vil: Well, first of all, this is proof that the UN mission that is in Haiti today is not there to protect the Haitian people, any more than the UN was in the Congo in the '60s to protect the people of the Congo, but rather to cover up a coup that took place and to impose puppet regimes in Haiti. If you're having elections, you cannot have political exiles. You cannot have the most popular party in Haiti, by everybody's account, including officials of government with whom we talk in private but who will never admit it in public, that Fanmi Lavalas is the most popular party in Haiti. And as you know, since 2004, they've banned Lavalas from participating in every election. They have arrested leaders, such as Father Jean-Juste, who was in jail when the election was taking place in 2006, So An, and many other people. And, of course, the very fact that President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and his family have to stay in South Africa during this period of need of Haiti tells you that what is being reinforced in Haiti is not democracy, but rather the rule by minority, so that the interests of the rich Haitians can be protected, like you saw in those reports—

Amy Goodman: Jean Saint-Vil, we need to get to Vox to talk about Wyclef Jean, who's going to be running for president. But I did want to ask you why President Aristide is not returning to Haiti. What's stopping him?

Jean Saint-Vil: He's not returning to Haiti for the same reason that, for the longest time, Nelson Mandela was considered a terrorist, even by the British. Jean-Bertrand Aristide is too popular for the United States, Canada and France to order President Préval to issue President Aristide his passport so he can travel to be back with his people. And when we met him in South Africa, we saw that he and his family are deprived of the ability to share their experience, especially an experience in South Africa, that could be very useful to Haiti, because we have the same dynamic of a minority, a very rich minority that doesn't understand the need to become more intelligent and share the resources with the majority of the population.

Amy Goodman: Vox Sambou, what about the well-known artist, singer, performer Wyclef Jean announcing he will be running for president of Haiti?

Vox Sambou: I think anybody has the right to apply to president of Haiti, but—legally, if he can, but the thing is, I think it's very unfortunate people are talking about the celebrity of only one person, while right now what we need is healthcare. If you go on the ground in my hometown, Limbé, you see what the people—they completely—they don't know what to do anymore, because they haven't seen anything. And right now the media only talks about the celebrity of one person. I think we have to go on the ground and see exactly what the people of Haiti, in the north, they're really demanding, because this is not a game. This is the most important thing happening in my country right now. And the media only focuses on one person. I think this is really not fair.

I mean, growing up in Haiti, when the first coup d'état happened in 1991, it wasn't a joke. We couldn't do anything. We had to stay inside our house. People were getting beaten up. And right now, we have the most important thing going on, and the things are not properly investigated. We're just going on the surface. We need people to go down there and talk to—especially in the rural area. People are not being informed. There is no electricity. You can't tell me a country like Canada or the US have so much power, and there's no electricity in the north. The people, they don't know what's going on. People at a school, for example, the public school of Lycée Jean-Baptiste Cinéas de Limbé, which has like 2,000 students, they don't have a nursing room. We raise money, Solid'Ayiti, here from Montreal—we raise money to send them one laptop that's serving the whole school with 100 personnel. And locally we're able to have five computers from the McGill University Department of Education. And this is what's going on right now. There's an immediate need. I don't think we should focus on one person. What Haiti needs right now—

Amy Goodman: We have ten seconds.

Vox Sambou: —is somebody with a lot of stability. We need somebody with stability.

Amy Goodman: But let me ask Jean Saint-Vil the same question, is, your thoughts on Wyclef Jean running? Ten seconds.

Jean Saint-Vil: Wyclef Jean is hiding the reality. So he's there as a smokescreen, so that those reports you just played about what's happening in the camps, people don't talk about it. So what Vox Sambou is saying about what's happening in the north, people don't talk about it. So, it's a smokescreen so that the real issues are not raised.

Amy Goodman: We want to thank you all for being with us, Jean Saint-Vil, speaking to us from Ottawa, his website godisnotwhite.com. We also want to thank Vox Sambou, as well as our guest Mark Schuller here in New York.

http://www.democracynow.org/2010/8/17/france_urged_to_pay_40_billion