

What's taking so long to cancel Haiti's debt?

By Nicole C. Lee
Special to Sentinel-Voice

There is an old Haitian Creole saying that roughly translates "things are so bad, we are eating dogs."

Today, things are so bad in Haiti that mothers, fathers and children are starving while their country is forced to pay an international debt burden of almost \$1 million (U.S.) per week.

Once again the plight of the people of Haiti is in the news. There are terrible stories from the nation's capitol, Port au Prince, where times are so difficult that many Haitians have no alternative but to eat dirt.

"Dirt cookies" — cakes made from salt, butter and dirt, while not a new survival tactic — highlight the grim reality of day to day life for many Haitians. Some 80 percent of the country's people are forced to live on \$2.00 a day, 50 percent survive on a \$1.00 a day or less. One in four children are chronically malnourished.

Haiti's once arable land continues to be deforested as the poor cut down trees in order to burn them for cooking and heat. Healthcare is inaccessible for so many and

the conditions that cause disease — contaminated water, poor shelter, and malnutrition — are rampant. While Haiti has a democratically elected government, the needs on the ground remain enormous. Due to the strain of natural disasters and the effects of structural poverty,

President Preval has recently requested that "Temporary Protective Status" be granted to Haitians who face deportation in the U.S.

The roots of Haiti's impoverishment run very deep. Born of a slave rebellion in 1804, Haiti was forced to pay the French for "the loss of its colony," even the loss of slave labor. This so-called debt was not paid off until the early 20th century and left the country virtually bankrupt. In the 1950s-1980s, Haiti's dictators were granted loans by International Financial Institutions, or "IFIs", such as the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank.

The U.S. has a majority vote in many of these institutions, sets the rules, and provides



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much of the financing. While these institutions were created to eradicate poverty, notorious dictators such as Francois Duvalier and Jean Claude Duvalier were provided loans that furnished their lavish lifestyles and repressive regimes rather than assist the people.

This behavior by dictators went on with a wink and a nod. Today, Haiti has nothing to show for these loans except a legacy of repression.

Nevertheless, Haiti is forced to pay off these debts. Every week, the government pays almost \$1 million to IFIs, in large part, to pay off these odious and onerous debts. That's \$1 million per week the government could use for poverty alleviation programs and democracy building; \$1 million spent on debt that could afford each child an education, healthcare and a real future.

When worldwide debt relief initiatives began to take root, Haiti was left out of those programs. While Haiti had an overwhelming debt for a country of its size and production,

it did not meet the debt burden threshold necessary to be eligible for relief programs such as HIPC, Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative. Despite paying on the debts, from 2000 until the coup that removed President Aristide, Haiti remained under a de facto humanitarian aid embargo. IFIs, under the watchful eye of Washington, withheld \$146 million of aid for potable water, roads and healthcare. Only recently, the IFIs have committed themselves to cancelling some of Haiti's odious debt. Although this is a good sign, the cancellation is conditional based on further reduction of public services for the Haitian poor and will take a year or more to be effective.

Stopping these conditionalities and speeding up Haiti's debt relief has received bipartisan support. But Congress must act now to alleviate the suffering in Haiti. The U.S. government must use its profound influence with the International Financial Institutions to demand immediate cancellation of Haiti's debt. There is no reason to wait. What could we possibly be waiting for?

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Imus redux: Talk radio personas must self-edit

By Marc H. Morial
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Almost one year after radio shock jock Don Imus sent shockwaves through the African-American community with his offensive and inflammatory remarks regarding the Rutgers University ladies basketball team, it's as if a repeat of history is upon us, in an election year in which an African-American candidate has a serious chance of winning the White House. Back in January, Golf Channel's Kelly Tilghman seriously botched an attempt at humor when she suggested that younger golf players might want to lynch Tiger Woods in a back alley in hopes of spicing up the tour.

The comment drew little ill will, at least publicly, from Woods, who reportedly considers the broadcaster a friend, but it prompted her employer to go into full damage control mode and suspend her for a few weeks.

"While we believe that Kelly's choice of words was inadvertent and that she did not intend them in an offensive manner, the words were hurtful and grossly inappropriate," Golf Channel representatives said in a statement.

The controversy precipitated yet another numbskull decision in the media, the display of a noose on the cover of *Golfweek*. There again, quick action rightly resulted — the sacking of the editor responsible.

But, believe it or not, it seems that the world of sports journalism seems to be aspiring to a higher standard in its response to embarrassing and offensive gaffes on air than the world of talk radio.

Earlier in February, radio commentator Laura Ingraham put her foot fully in her mouth and down her throat in her criticism of President George W. Bush's invitation of the Rev. Al Sharpton to the White House's recent Black History Month event. On her national syndicated radio program on Talk Radio Network, she said she had hoped that "they nailed down all the valuables."

Then, Fox News personality and radio talk show host Bill O'Reilly just had to invoke the phrase "lynching mob" in reference to Michelle Obama's comments regarding the United States on his syndicated radio show. On MSNBC's "Countdown" in February, *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson expressed disgust over O'Reilly's comment.

"There's certainly nothing at all funny or remotely appropriate about the use of a lynching reference about Michelle Obama," he said. "It's — I'm speechless."

As President Bush pointed out so eloquently during the Black History Month



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event, the noose represents "more than a tool of murder, but a tool of intimidation" to generations of African-Americans. Nooses not only robbed some of their lives, but many of their peace of mind.

"As a civil society, we must understand that noose displays and lynching jokes are deeply offensive. They are wrong. And they have no place in America today," he said.

Neither O'Reilly nor Ingraham has been reprimanded by their respective employers even though the Fox News personality did offer a half-hearted apology.

At least Ingraham didn't drop the L-word but her suggestion that Sharpton, a former presidential candidate and respected member of the African-American community and beyond, is a petty thief reeks of race-baiting and negative stereotyping of African-Americans and Black men in particular.

But it's hardly the first time either has ventured into questionable and offensive territory. How can we forget O'Reilly's less-than-informed comments regarding a dinner

he shared last year with Sharpton at Sylvia's in Harlem? O'Reilly expressed surprise over how similar Sylvia's was to other restaurants in New York.

"There wasn't one person in Sylvia's who was screaming, 'M-Fer, I want more iced tea,'" he said.

As the *Washington Post*'s Robinson sadly observed on MSNBC in February, "All you can go by is his words and his actions. And he keeps saying these things that sound pretty darn racist to me."

Has talk radio learned anything from Imus' decline and fall? Of course not, because it didn't take Imus too terribly long to get a new gig.

Our nation's media outlets should not provide a platform for racial hostility and hateful speech now or in the future. What kind of message are we sending to our children, our nation and our world?

In such an historic election year, we cannot stand aside and allow individuals to use the airwaves as an outlet for insensitive and misguided commentary. If you hear something that offends you, speak up.

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Curry

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those comments.

Hillary Clinton tried to draw a distinction between how she and Obama handled reprehensible, unsolicited support.

CLINTON: ... I'm just saying that you asked specifically if he would reject it. And there's a difference between denouncing and rejecting... I just think, we've got to be even stronger...

OBAMA: Tim, I have to say I don't see a difference between denouncing and rejecting. There's no formal offer of help from Minister Farrakhan that would involve me reject-

ing it. But if the word "reject" Senator Clinton feels is stronger than the word "denounce," then I'm happy to concede the point, and I would reject and denounce.

As the above exchange illustrates, even when one has strongly and consistently denounced and rejected Farrakhan, opponents still try to link the two with political Velcro.

It's time to now "denounce and reject" those who repeatedly seek to use the Farrakhan stick to pummel Blacks seeking public office.

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Jefferson

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find new financing after sealing a deal in Nigeria proved difficult. They turned to Lori Mody, a McClean, Va., businesswoman.

Mody allegedly gave Jefferson \$100,000 in July 2005 to pay off Nigerian Vice President Atiku Abubakar and get his support for the iGate technology. But Mody, who was apparently disgruntled by Jefferson's bribe demands, had also been working with the FBI since March.

On Aug. 3, the FBI raided Jefferson's homes in Washington and New Orleans.

He is charged with 16 counts of racketeering, bribery, money laundering and obstruction of justice. His trial was sched-

uled to start Monday in Alexandria, Va., but it has been delayed, possibly for several months, pending an appeal on whether his status as a congressman protects him from prosecution.

Jefferson has avoided questions about the allegations and never offered any explanation for what happened to the \$10,000 of the \$100,000 not found in his freezer.

"They don't call him 'Dollar Bill' for nothing," said Elliott Stonecipher, a political consultant in Louisiana for 30 years.

"We've always known, whether it was in his political life or in his financial dealings that were enmeshed with his political dealings, that he was someone dancing the line."