

COMMENTARY

Food Riots in Haiti Threaten Progress

Johanna Mendelson Forman

In the four years since the UN Stabilization Force (MINUSTAH) entered Haiti, there has been progress in security on the streets. And after security, the political stability of the nation was advanced by a successful election that returned René Préval to a second term as president. But Haitians remain frustrated by the ultimate challenge in any post-conflict environment: a lack of food as a result of a lack of jobs. This week's food riots in the Haitian capital, Port au Prince, and in other cities throughout the country underscore the problems when a weak economy is battered by global price increases for basic commodities.

The rise in food costs have resulted in bread riots in other poor developing countries, such as Egypt and the Philippines. But Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, has little room for any price increase when more than 8 million people live on less than \$2 a day. Next to security, which has improved with the help of UN forces, and generous donor support from Canada and the United States for police and judicial capacity, access to reasonably priced food remains essential to demonstrate progress to anyone trying to survive the turmoil of any stabilization program.

The riots and looting that took place this week underscore how fragile any poor country is when confronted by global trends that reverberate in the form of scarcity. Donor countries, which are scheduled to meet in Port au Prince on April 25 to discuss progress to date on development and poverty reduction, must focus on basics—getting adequate food to the neediest and ensuring that the World Food Program, whose Haiti appeal for \$84 million remains unmet, can begin to relieve the crisis. (Today, only \$12.4 million has been received to address Haiti's food emergency.)

Politics is not mob violence. President Préval has demanded calm, and the streets are quiet today. But unless the global community rises to the occasion and finds a way to meet immediate human needs, all the stability operations of the United Nations will not overcome the basic human instinct of fighting for food to survive.

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