

Haiti: Paradise lost

It is difficult to imagine the desperation that drives Haitians, most of whom greatly fear the water, to risk their lives on a 500-mile voyage across shark-infested waters, on flimsy, water-logged rafts, just to reach the coast of Florida. Every month, bodies of these pitiful boat people wash up on Miami's beaches.

This week came a routine, chilling report. Fifty or 60 Haitians had been thrown overboard from an overcrowded raft that was taking on water.

Hundreds of other Haitians have paid their life savings to human smugglers and then been thrown into the sea. In spite of these dangers, refugees from Haiti keep coming.

Poor, tragic Haiti. In 1800, under French colonial rule, Haiti's rich, fertile land earned more from exports of sugar, indigo and spices than all of Spain's gold-producing colonies in Latin America combined. Then came the great slave revolts that overthrew the French plantation system.

Two remarkable slave generals, Toussaint L'Ouverture and Dessalines, defeated Napoleon's finest troops and officers. Haiti became one of the first European colonies to free itself.

But, sadly, the great black generals were to also be Haiti's last great men. The mad Emperor Christophe bankrupted the nation building the Citadel at Cap Haitien, one of the hemisphere's largest and most unique structures.

He was followed by more than a century of thieving, incompetent and brutal rulers.

For a century after independence in 1804, Haitian peasants cut down the island's once lush forests to make charcoal. As the mountains became denuded, heavy rains washed the rich topsoil into the sea. By the 1930s, Haiti could no longer feed itself. Between 1804 and the present, the only period of peace and relative prosperity in Haiti's sad history — its

Punch



"I always do quite well until the January sales."

ERIC MARGOLIS



golden age— was during the 1920s when the U.S. Marine Corps ran the island.

After 182 years of black rule, Haiti has gone from being the richest nation in the western hemisphere to the poorest. The nation that produced Napoleon's wife today resembles central Africa, scourged by myriad diseases, devastated by poverty, sunk into primitive ignorance and despair.

Add to this the modern plague of AIDS that is rife in Haiti and the island becomes a tragedy floating on the Caribbean Sea.

As if these miseries were not enough, Haiti's 5.5 million people have been ruled for the past 30 years by the Duvalier family. The legendary Papa Doc, one of the most unforgettable people I have ever met, was a monster of transcendental evil. Papa Doc's Ton Ton Macoute (Creole for bogeyman) killers turned life for the gentle Haitian people into a nightmare of torture, terror, voodoo and that even blacker art, ongan.

So frightful was this former country doctor and high priest of black magic that even today Haitians tremble at the mention of his name — many convinced that late at night he still walks about.

Papa Doc died 15 years ago. Power was taken over by the Duvalier family, fronted by the pudgy Baby Doc. Terror has receded, the Ton Tons have been reined in. But Haitians still live under a frightening tyranny that has done little to improve their lot. Last week food riots broke out in the tatty city of Gonaives. Scores were shot and more jailed. This was the first time in recent memory that large-scale riots had erupted.

Such rioting suggests that the patience of the long-suffering Haitians, a docile, artistic and genial people, may be finally at an end. Hunger, disease — and now growing starvation — can no longer be borne. Corruption funnels off a good part of the U.S. aid that keeps the island afloat. And the U.S. Congress is growing restive at funding a regime that so abuses its own people.

Haiti is definitely heading for a long-overdue explosion. Eagerly awaiting the event is Cuba, only 60 miles away across the strategic Windward Passage. It is no secret that Castro has made Haiti his No. 1 revolutionary target in the Caribbean. The question now is whether Haiti can somehow get rid of its awful government without falling into the clutches of the communists.

Here is a splendid opportunity for Canada to do some good in the world. Instead of dishing out money to various rag-bag socialist states in Africa, we should help our desperate neighbors in the West Indies. While Canada stockpiles mountains of unsold grain, eggs and butter, people in Haiti die daily from nutritional deficiency diseases. We cannot feed the world, but we certainly can assure that people do not starve in our own backyard.