

ENGLISH TRANSLATION (Sheila Das, Jean-Marie Bourjolly)

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**An Assessment of the Many Facets of Cholera in Haiti
A Review of Ralph R. Frerichs' *Deadly River***

Part III

By Jean-Marie Bourjolly



When Piarroux met with Larsen and Préal to present the evidence gathered about the outbreak of the epidemic in the vicinity of the Nepalese camp, he thought that “obviously... this is not new information to these men. But he also knew that the president had made a public statement that he had no idea how the epidemic started. Was this his *official* position, a necessary façade to avoid trouble with the powerful United Nations? The elections were only eleven days away. The president obviously needed MINUSTAH to maintain calm” (p. 81-82).

Ricardo Seitenfus called Préal “the Florentine of the Caribbean,” a double-edged compliment. The serpentine nature that the Florentine qualifier evokes will manifest itself in the fact that he “refused to speak to the press about the origin of the cholera outbreak and had prohibited his ministers and their staff from talking about the issue publicly.” At the same time, he “wanted the Haitian people to know the truth,” according to Piarroux (p. 95).

Thus, the report prepared by the Haitian epidemiologists the MSPP sent to Mirebalais on October 21 and, since then, kept under wraps was delivered to Piarroux anonymously and secretly (p. 43): “Inside the envelope was the official Haitian government report that described the investigation of the initial cholera outbreak in the Mirebalais area by the medical and hospital staff of both the Centre département and the communes of Mirebalais and neighboring Lascahobas, including two epidemiologists. The contents were monumental. [Piarroux] had heard from Haitian colleagues that such a report might exist. That it had not come into his hands previously spoke volumes” (p. 113).

According to Piarroux, “the report left no doubt as to the epidemic’s starting point. The investigators did everything right.... This early report by Haitian health officials was nothing short of a *bombshell*” (p. 114). Piarroux was convinced that the leak of the report and preliminary laboratory results had occurred “on the authority of President René Préal, acting through Minister of Health Alex Larsen” (p. 119). This was the only explanation that made sense to him.

Immunity, the United Nations’ last card

Resistance to the cover-up, initiated by some journalists and individual scientists, had been gathering strength. In an article focusing on the importance of how the epidemic began in Haiti, Marie-Pierre Allié, president of the French section of Doctors Without Borders (MSF), “call[ed] out the [CDC] for what appeared to her as hypocrisy.” She acknowledged the “two explanatory

models” and insisted that "priority be given to ‘the confirmation or rejection of one or the other by an independent, multidisciplinary team.’ She demanded transparency, too” (p. 162).

In March 2012, Deborah Sontag of the *New York Times* (NYT) quoted Piarroux and Paul Keim, the "microbial geneticist whose laboratory determined that the Haitian and Nepalese strains were virtually identical." She wrote that the epidemic was introduced by Nepalese peacekeepers (p. 199).

The United Nations, shielding itself behind the "independent" panel's conclusions, did not give an inch. But two of the panelists, Balakrish Nair and Daniele Lantagne, “abandoned the monolith of the UN - publicly" (p. 199). The United Nations refused to comment on either the NYT article or on the position shift of Nair and Lantagne. When their spokesperson was asked about that, he replied: “Any other questions?” (p. 200).

In her article, Sontag cited two lawyers from the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux according to which the United Nations had the choice between “ris[ing] to the occasion... or... demonstrat[ing] that once again in Haiti, ‘might makes right’” (p. 200).

The *Wall Street Journal* and *The Huffington Post* each published a text about *Baseball in the Time of Cholera*, presented at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York, a film produced “‘to put a face’ on the epidemic” and participate in the “emerging campaign to pressure the UN” (p. 201).

In April, *The Economist* published an editorial in which "it strongly rebuked the UN’s ‘dodge’ of responsibility" (p. 201). This weekly journal recalls that a special court had been planned to hear disagreements with the Haitian government, that this had not been done and that the lawyers for the victims “threaten[ed] to challenge MIINUSTAH’s [*sic*] immunity in the Haitian courts"(p. 201). Unfortunately, contrary to *The Economist’s* editorial, there was little chance that such a trial might see the light of day. Whoever the president, the Haitian government would choose to silence any disagreement with the United Nations, specifically by hiding the report prepared by its services on the epidemic’s origin. Anyway, what hope could we put in the Haitian Justice system as it had recently proved unwilling to proceed against the former President-for-Life Jean-Claude Duvalier, whose crimes against humanity were well documented? In fact, even the proceeds of his robberies, property that had been confiscated, were returned to him.

In May, the NYT takes position in an editorial: "The United Nations bears heavy responsibility for the outbreak: its own peacekeepers introduced the disease through sewage leaks at one [of] their encampments" (p. 201).

Frerichs concluded that "the UN was losing the battle to keep opinion makers on its side" (p. 201). But Colwell, Cravioto and other proponents of the environmental thesis "were preparing a new offensive" (p. 202). They published an article in June 2012: "Colwell, the corresponding author, used her strong connections and academic status to get the article accepted as a ‘contributed submission,’ which allowed her to appoint the two reviewers rather than having anonymous reviewers selected by the editor – the norm for scientific journals" (p 202.).

Colwell *et alia* found that some *Vibrio cholerae* strains known to be benign were present. Even though these strains are known to cause diarrhea but not epidemics, they argued that their role "either alone or in concert with *V. cholerae* O1 [introduced by MINUSTAH, one of the two strains that cause epidemics], cannot be dismissed" (p. 203).

This was a roundabout and pathetic way to try to etch out some space for the environmental argument without providing the slightest shred of evidence about its validity. It's like a lawyer who, being unable to present evidence to exonerate his client, tries to create doubt in the minds of the jury. While this is a legitimate tactic in court, such action has no place in science. In a rear-guard action, "Colwell and her colleagues seemed to accept that the deadly cholera bacteria had been imported to Haiti by 'outside visitors' but were not convinced that the visitors were Nepalese UN soldiers" (p. 204).

This article did not go unanswered. The Piarroux team countered, as did that of John Mekalanos of Harvard (p. 205). Kai Kupferschmidt of *Science* magazine "wasn't satisfied with what Colwell and Sack had to say" (p. 207). In response to pointed questions by Richard Knox, of *National Public Radio* (NPR), Colwell presented her theory of a "perfect storm": the epidemic was due to the earthquake that would have increased the alkalinity of the waters of the Artibonite; combined with abnormally high temperatures in the summer of 2010; and Hurricane Tomas (p. 207). None of this she proved, and Tomas, as everyone knows, happened afterwards.

There was nothing left for the UN but to hide behind the argument of its immunity, which Ban Ki-moon officially communicated to President Martelly in February 2013 (p. 215). Martelly, like his predecessor, did not want to defy the United Nations to which he owed his election as president. The testimony of Seitenfus, former representative of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Haiti, as well as emails from Cheryl Mills to Hillary Clinton, reveal the role played not only by Edmond Mulet, head of MINUSTAH, but also by the Core Group representatives in calling the shots in Haiti, even to the extent of manipulating election results, as in 2010.

Addendum only in English Translation

When asked what he thinks about the lawsuit against the UN in American courts, Martelly stated: "People can do what they want. But the government has the task to manage relationships, and I think we are doing a good job" (p. 251). The lawsuit was dismissed in January 2015. "The UN didn't even show up to defend itself. Instead, the United States Government assumed that role, with the U.S. attorney asserting the UN's absolute immunity" (p. 251).

Continued in Part 4 on July 18, 2016