

April 13, 2022

The Harsh Choice: Kidnapping or Drowning

The social, economic, moral misery in Haiti continues its downward spiral. The skyrocketing increase in the price of virtually everything is choking all, but especially the poor. Moreover, we are once again facing a shortage of gasoline, which will make things even worse. My staff can't survive on the wages I pay them. In the face of collapsing purchasing power, I need to give everyone a modest raise. Hunger and disarray reign throughout the nation. In Port-au-Prince people hide in their homes. When they are forced to go out, they expose themselves to a litany of dangers. Kidnappings have become a thriving industry. While things at this moment seem calm, the tension remains high. People are desperate. Some try to escape the misery and danger.

On March 14th, a wooden sailboard with about 130 Haitian fleeing the madness and chaos of Haiti ran aground on a sandbar just a short distance from the shore of an island in the Florida Keys. Moments before the boat tipped on its side, dumping the Haitians in the water, residents on shore could hear the sound of singing and hymns. Suddenly, those onboard were fighting for their lives. Some residence threw lifelines to the Haitians. Since the start of the year, more than 800 Haitians have landed in the 113-mile-long Florida Keys, made up 1,700 small islands.

The U.S. Coast Guard has been intercepting about four Haitian migrant vessels per month at sea, each with an average of about 150 occupants on board. The boats just seem to have been drifting, with no electronics, and very little ability to navigate. Coast Guard crews have interdicted 2,953 Haitian migrants at sea since the start of the federal fiscal year on October 1st, nearly 1,500 more Haitians than were picked up at sea last year. The Coast Guard is now on track to intercept 15 times as many Haitian migrants this year as it did in fiscal year 2020. Most will be sent back to Haiti, back to the insanity of unbridled violence, constant hunger, and endless misery.

On Monday here in Port-au-Prince a man was seated in his parked car. Someone walked up to the car and shot the man in his head. A news report said that witnesses claimed the police who were nearby the shooting did nothing to apprehend the killer. On Tuesday, Steph and I drove to the bottom of our hillside to get propane gas for her mother. The gas station had no gas, but they were selling propane gas. On the short ride how, Steph saw a man lying in street. I had driven passed him. I slowed down and pulled to side of the road. I asked if she wanted me to backup so we could help the man. I could sense she wanted to help, but she said no, adding that in Haiti people are now afraid to help some because they think the person in need is just faking and will pull out a gun and rob the person trying to help. Fear is in the air. Traffic is light because no one has gas to operate their cars. It all feels hopeless and dangerous.

Honeymoon

Spending the first four months of our married life in Haiti has not been easy. There have been numerous tough moments. Actually, numerous tough days would be more like it. Living inside of Santa Chiara is like living in a fish tank. Twenty-four hours a day in what is essentially our workplace without any days off is taking its toll on us. We really need to get away by ourselves for a week. We thought about going to Peru and spend time with my friend Dr. Tony in his home

for about 50 sick and handicapped children. While it didn't sound romantic, it was at least out of Haiti, and central part of Lima has some charm to it. In order for Steph to enter Lima she needs a visa from the Peruvian government. But the Peru Embassy in Port-au-Prince is closed because of the violence and instability of the city. To get the visa we would have to travel to Santa Domingo in the Dominican Republic. But she would need a visa to enter the DR. The visa is relatively easy to obtain, but costs about \$250. The high price is meant to keep Haitians out of the DR. So, the cost of the visa, two plane tickets, and a night in a hotel seem far too great a price to pay for a visa to Peru. We send a text message to the Peruvian Embassy in the DR asking for their assistance, but never received a response.

When I heard that Air France was resuming flight between Paris and Port-au-Prince I got excited, thinking a week in Paris would be wonderful. Stéphanie speaks fluent French. When I saw the price of the plane tickets, my enthusiasm waned. Beyond the cost of the flights, we had no idea of the cost of a hotel room for a week. The idea of a delayed honeymoon in Paris slowly fizzled. But recently I began to think that while I could not afford the trip to France, I also thought I could not afford not to go. We decided to seriously explore the options. The first inquiry we had to make was the procedure for Steph to obtain a visa. Yesterday we decided to drive to the French Embassy in downtown. Before going I asked our security guy if going downtown was safe. It said there were no reports of violence so far that day I could tell he was hesitant about my going.

I went back upstairs to ask Steph if she thought it was prudent to have Robenson drive us downtown for security reason. I went back downstairs to speak Robenson. He then said we would not be admitted to the French Embassy without an appointment. Back upstairs I went. We logged onto the French Embassy website, where we learned that we had to go to the Soge Bank to make an appointment. The fee at the bank was \$100. The nearest bank is at Delmas 30, on a main road that is crowded and has little available parking. It would not be safe for me to wait in the car while Steph went in the bank. Gabens will take Steph to the bank today.

Absolutely nothing in Haiti is easy. On our way to get the propane gas yesterday I got stuck behind a big, old truck transported huge blocks of ice the size of coffins. The ice was under blankets to keep the sun from quickly melting. I told Steph about my first living experience in a slum in Haiti. I had no electricity which meant I had no refrigerator. I had a large cooler and was constantly buying ice for it. On the walk back to my shack, much of the ice melted. It was my first real taste of the brutally hard life of the poor.

I'm already feeling that the legal and financial hoops we must jump through to go to Paris will not be possible. I dream of returning to the Louvre and the Orsay museums in Paris...if we could afford the tickets.