

Police Continue Attacks Against Aristide Supporters in Haiti

(Haiti Information Project, Oct. 5) Gunfire erupted in the western slum of Martissant today as the Haitian police conducted a daytime raid following their claim of an attack on a local police station there last Sunday.

Local supporters of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide had paralyzed the community in response to an attack by the Haitian National Police (PNH) on a peaceful demonstration demanding his return on September 30th. Aristide was ousted last February 29th amid charges he was kidnapped by U.S. Marines and remains in exile in the Republic of South Africa.

According to witnesses, heavily armed units of the PNH cordoned off the community at about 10:00 a.m. and began a sweep through the area. Gunfire could be heard as they entered with force and residents reported at least two people were killed and several more wounded. At least fifteen young men were reportedly seen being handcuffed and placed in the back of a large covered truck. Family members on the scene stated police would not respond when questioned about where they were being taken and are worried for their safety.

Violence erupted in Haiti on September 30th after police opened fire on unarmed demonstrators. Witnesses say a unit of the Unite de Securite Presidentielle (U.S.P), a special security detail assigned to Interim President Boniface Alexandre, came under attack after police opened fire on the marchers. Witnesses say members of a special police unit were seen firing on demonstrators and collecting bodies before masked gunmen returned fire killing three and wounding a fourth who later died in the hospital.

The U.S.-backed government claims that the headless bodies of two policemen were later recovered and that Aristide supporters have launched a campaign imitating beheadings in Iraq called "Operation Baghdad." Representatives of Aristide's Family Lavalas party have denied the allegations. A Lavalas party spokesman stated, "It was the police who provoked the violence by firing on demonstrators who were demanding the return of President Aristide."

Political tensions ratcheted up last Saturday when three Lavalas spokesmen were arrested after participating in a broadcast on local Radio Caraibes FM. During the course of the program, former Deputy Roudy Hérivaux, Senate Chairman Yvon Feuillé, and Senator Gerald Gilles denounced the violence and condemned the police for firing on unarmed demonstrators on September 30th.

The police entered Radio Caraibes and arrested the three on charges of "inciting violence" related to September 30th. The police action was condemned by the management of Radio Caraibes stating that it "harms the reputation of the station and is an infringement of freedom of expression." Radio Caraibes has suspended broadcasting indefinitely in protest.

Haitian officials announced yesterday that they would free Gilles, citing a lack of evidence implicating him in the violence, but he still remains behind bars. Minister of Justice Bernard Gousse continues to maintain that Hérivaux and Feuillé were the "intellectual authors" of the attacks against the police on September 30th. The two legislators deny any involvement and have called for peace and an end to the violence.

The police action in Martissant comes one day after residents in the slum of Bel Air exchanged gunfire with police surrounding their neighborhood. Heavily armed units of the Haitian National Police encircled the community yesterday following an ultimatum issued by residents demanding the release of the three leaders arrested on Saturday.

Lavalas militants had threatened to take to the streets in a new wave of protests unless Former Deputy Roudy Hérivaux, Senator Gerald Gilles, and Senate President Yvon Feuillé were freed unconditionally. The slum of Bel Air has been under a virtual state of siege by the police since September 30th.

Heavily armed police units backed up by unidentified paramilitaries can be seen at major intersections in Port au Prince for a second straight day. Witnesses continue to report heavy gunfire in the pro-Aristide slum of Cite Soleil following last week's killing of two men by the police who they described as gang leaders.

Reports continue of exchanges of heavy gunfire between the police and residents of the seaside slum which is home to more than 500,000 Haitians living in extreme poverty.

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