

October 1, 2004

Haiti Protests: UN/Brazilian Troops stand-by as Haitian police provoke violence

Haiti Information Project /

Port au Prince, Haiti (HIP) - Last September 11th more than 10,000 Lavalas militants took to the streets to demand the return of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The marchers were accompanied by a large contingent of Haitian police who returned fire when unidentified gunmen shot at the demonstration as it passed the Office of National Insurance on Delmas 17. The crowd immediately took up the chant, "Down with the army. Long live the police!"

Another march was planned for September 30th marking the thirteenth anniversary of the military coup that overthrew Aristide in 1991. Although organizers for the march received permits from the Haitian National Police (PNH) it was clear from the beginning something was amiss. The first noticeable difference was the absence of police escorts that normally ride shotgun at the head and tail of these types of sanctioned demonstrations. These days the police are also aided by roving UN vehicles that monitor the negotiated route of the demonstration. They were conspicuously absent as well.

By 10:00 am it was evident this wasn't going to be business as usual on the streets of Port au Prince. More than 10,000 singing and chanting Lavalas militants had already started pouring out of the slums of Bel Air and were marching towards the national palace. It was certain that if the march continued it would swell to even greater numbers by midday despite reports that Lavalas militants from the Cite Soleil slum had just been ambushed by police and blocked from joining the march.

As the crowd approached the capital's center known as "Champ Mars", three armored personnel vehicles and an impressive line of Brazilian soldiers in full riot gear blocked their access to the street in front of the national palace. Despite the hurtling of a few insults by the crowd, intended for the UN troops Lavalas considers to be occupiers of Haiti, the march passed without incident and continued towards the old section of Port au Prince known as "La Ville."

As the demonstration passed a street leading to the National Penitentiary, heavily armed units of the police SWAT team opened fire without warning on the crowd. People panicked and scattered in all directions knocking over goods of the local market place women in an effort to seek cover from the gunfire. The shooting continued sporadically for nearly twenty minutes as angry marchers began to break out car windows as they fled. On another side street a pickup truck with four policemen could be seen shooting and then stopping to collect the bodies of two of their victims. It was at this moment everything changed.

Up to this point, in what had been a peaceful demonstration, not a single weapon was brandished or seen among the marchers. Suddenly, according to witnesses, five men in masks appeared out of nowhere with small firearms. They surrounded the police in the small pickup truck and began to return fire. Despite the fact they were heavily outgunned by automatic weapons, they managed to catch the police in a deadly crossfire. Witnesses say that two of the police were killed almost immediately while a third died of his wounds in the hospital and the US-backed government is claiming a fourth was kidnapped by demonstrators.

Justice Minister Bernard Gousse claims that there were no deaths reported among the marchers although several witnesses dispute this. This is understandable given that Lavalas marchers now collect bodies as they fall because they do not trust the current government to allow the families to give them a proper burial.

The official version being put out by the UN is that "a gunfight broke out between Aristide supporters and security guards at shops looted during the march" to cover the fact that the Haitian National Police provoked the incident by firing on unarmed demonstrators. Observers note this may also be to

protect the Brazilian troops from embarrassment and explaining why they stood by as the Haitian police provoked the conflict. At the same time the UN is claiming that the violence occurred before the marchers reached the national palace, witnesses including many in the press, say this is not the case.