

HAÏTI

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Haiti's political currents grow turbulent

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• **Richard Lapper**

Stung by criticism that his government has responded lackadaisically to one of Haiti's worst natural disasters, Gerard Latortue appeared to be trying to make up for it on Saturday morning.

Horns tooting, the convoy of SUVs carrying Haiti's prime minister, as well as Boniface Alexandre, its president, and other government ministers, sped at break-neck pace through the crumbling mud-filled streets of the shattered town.

At a thinly attended cathedral service ministers resplendent in their best suits and ties listened in stony silence to a "symbolic" funeral for the more than 3,000 people killed three weeks ago when two-metre high floodwater crashed through their homes.

The convoy stopped briefly at the mayor's office and sped on to a short ceremony at the site of a mass grave, all the while avoiding ever angrier crowds. By lunchtime Mr Latortue, who

had made no attempt to talk to people, was gone.

Admittedly it has not been easy for the government, which took over after the departure of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the populist president, in February. Haiti's institutions have been crumbling for decades. The international community has provided money, 3,000 United Nations troops and medical help but little of the heavy equipment needed to clean up.

Gonaïves is isolated. A journey of just over 160km to Port-au-Prince, the capital, takes up to 11 hours.

The flooding reflected chronic infrastructure problems in Gonaïves. In the past two decades the cotton and textile industries have collapsed and many of the town's inhabitants have left to work in the US.

But migrants have still moved there from rural areas. Its population has nearly doubled since 1991, and illegal settlements have played havoc with the canals that drain the town. Garbage has piled up in the sea, making the problem worse. Violence has made the relief effort difficult. Distribution centres have been attacked by paramilitaries and there has been constant pilfering.

Even so, the government's lack of leadership has been stunning. Although Yves-Andre Wainwright, the environment minister, has co-ordinated efforts, he appears to lack political weight and no efforts have been made to mobilise the population for the clean-up. There is not enough heavy digging equipment and few of the government's lorries have been sent to the town. No provision has been made to contain health risks caused by the failure to clean up mud and the blood, faeces and hospital detritus that it contains. Most human and animal corpses have been cleared, although Uruguayan soldiers complain that they found a pig casually eating the remains of a small child as recently as a week ago.

The town's main streets are clogged with mounds of drying mud and the air is full of noxious dust. Juan Gabriel Valdes, the UN's special envoy in Haiti, raised hackles by criticising the local "political class" for its lack of urgency but privately his colleagues and many officials are more impatient.

"Very, very little has been done," says one Haitian official, but "it has to be done. With all this mud around here we will soon have a big problem with epidemics."

Health risks are not the only issue. Because canals remain clogged there is a constant risk that flooding could recur. Julienne Jean, a 43-year-old small farmer who lost her cow, pigs and a small garden last month, said : "It's started again. This was how it happened last time there was nowhere for the water to go."

The really worrying prospect is that Haiti's volatile political currents could soon start to overflow. Lavalas, Mr Aristide's party whose name means "cleansing flood" in Haitian Creole, recently stepped up its campaign to bring its leader back from exile. Fighting between Aristide's militants, policemen and rightwing paramilitaries has caused the deaths of at least 45 people in Port-au-Prince in the past two weeks.

That ought not be a problem in Gonaïves, where Mr Aristide's supporters rebelled against their leader and sparked the attacks against his government that triggered the February crisis. The worry for Mr Latortue is that these same forces, first known as the Cannibal Army and now the National Reconstruction Front (FRN), could turn against him too.

On Saturday Wilfort Ferdinand, a FRN leader, was policing the demonstrations against the government, with marchers calling Mr Latortue and Mr Boniface liars and a thieves. By Saturday evening his group had blocked roads and fired shots into the air. "If the government does not do what needs to be done we will take action."

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