

HAÏTI

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Haiti: Blows to stability

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In the aftermath of devastating floods that decimated parts of Haiti in August, the interim government of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue faces a new, political, crisis. Tensions have exploded in the area of Gonaives, the city most badly struck by Tropical Storm Jeanne, as rescue workers and relief agencies have struggled to provide food and water to the homeless. And the capital city, Port-au-Prince, has been hit with a new wave of protests by followers of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the president who was ousted in February. Indeed, political and economic instability are likely to wreak havoc on Haitians' lives and business operations well into the medium term.

The Latortue administration has seemed unable to assist in the humanitarian efforts in and near Gonaives, leaving the task to the international agencies. The latest storm killed

more than 2,500 people. Hurricane Ivan along with Jeanne left an estimated 300,000 Haitians homeless. Providing for these victims is a monumental task that has diverted the attention of hundreds of the 3,000 UN peacekeepers presently in Haiti. Staffing and funds for the job are lacking; the UN has requested US\$32m from the international community to meet the country's immediate needs over the coming months.

The dire situation has provided both a justification of and opportunity for the supporters of the deposed Mr Aristide to clamour for his return. Several days of marches and riots in Port-au-Prince left 15 Haitians dead by October 2nd. The violence is not surprising: both the pro-Aristide gangs and the rebel groups that overthrew Mr Aristide in February remain heavily armed. Though the interim government and the UN soldiers have been charged with disarming the various groups as they prepare for elections in 2005, little of this has actually been accomplished. Indeed, the peacekeepers have struggled to wrest control from the rebels in some areas of the country, and former soldiers among the rebels have called for a revival of the army. Some rebel leaders have also expressed political ambitions.

Meanwhile, Mr Aristide's party, Lavalas, has been sidelined and its supporters are being persecuted. Three prominent members of the party, including the senate president, were arrested on October 2nd in connection with the killing of three police officers during the latest protests. Police have also raided pro-Aristide slum neighbourhoods in search of weapons. These incidents will certainly increase the level of tension in the country.

String of disasters

Haiti has been in turmoil since late 2003, when anti-Aristide protests intensified, culminating in his exile and ushering in the US-backed Latortue government. The country was then hit by flooding in May, killing hundreds, and had not yet recovered from that disaster when it was struck by Ivan and Jeanne. In this environment of both man-made and natural disaster, it has proven extremely difficult for UN peacekeepers to stabilise the country.

Nor has the Latortue administration appeared competent to lead the effort. Though only an interim government, it has benefited from the backing of US troops initially, and now of UN soldiers as well as inflows of foreign financial assistance. Yet its technocratic style has failed to instil confidence in the population, so that the political polarisation that has plagued the country in recent years has not improved.

The economy, already the poorest in the hemisphere, is apt to suffer further after the destruction wrought by Jeanne. Even before the latest storms, prices had risen as a result of political upheaval, criminal activity and earlier flooding. The high price of rice in particular has caused hardship. And energy supplies were already seriously disrupted, largely owing to the government's fiscal shortfall. Now the loss of agricultural crops, combined with long-term ecological damage because of deforestation, suggests that the country will not be able to achieve self-sufficiency even in meeting its food needs.

The outlook into the medium term is one of continued economic and political instability. Even if the UN forces are able to quell the latest unrest, tensions are likely to persist, threatening to erupt into violence again in the future.

For the time being — and perhaps indefinitely — Haiti will be dependent on international forces to restore order and for humanitarian relief and economic aid. Badly needed investment, especially in infrastructure and economic development projects, will have to be financed by international donors and lenders. Even with this assistance, and even if elections are successfully held by the end of 2005, the country's ability to fend for itself will remain in doubt.

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