

Council On Hemispheric Affairs

MONITORING OF THE AMERICAN ECONOMY AND THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE
Memorandum to the Press 04.72

Word Count: 1500

Wednesday, 13 October 2004

Violence in Haiti: Colin Powell and Gerard Latortue Blame Aristide, When the Blame Lies With Them

On October 4, Haitians staged yet another in the country's growing number of street demonstrations, calling for the return of democratically-elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was ousted by a State Department-scripted coup last February 29. In recent days, these manifestations have cost 30 lives in the Port-au-Prince area alone, generating further popular anger against the U.S.-sanctioned local authorities. The latest protest pitted the island's ill-trained police and Brazilian-led U.N. peacekeepers against pro-Aristide supporters, resulting in fourteen dead, including three police officers. In comments to the Miami Herald, Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue blamed the violence on "The Aristide loyalists [who] were trying to intimidate and derail the municipal, legislative and presidential elections scheduled for next year."

Setting the Scene

From Latortue's first days in office, members of Aristide's Lavalas Party—rather than renegade ex-police and military personnel, and members of the previous junta—were the interim president's enemy. But in recent days, Latortue has been stepping up his anti-Aristide rhetoric with the probable goal of building a case against the participation of the former Haitian president and his party in next year's elections. There is no doubt that Latortue will soon be using the perilous security situation to build support for reconstituting the brutal Haitian armed forces. He will also use the situation to advance the electoral prospects of Haiti's business-led rightwing

political movement, in particular the Group of 184, led by the unscrupulous sweatshop labor king, Andy Apaid Jr., a U.S. national.

Rather than this far-fetched explanation of the alleged threat posed by Aristide, based on a ballot that might not happen (at least not by next year), Latortue instead should have traced part of the blame for the recent series of public protests to the gross incompetence that he and his government have displayed ever since he was raised up from obscurity by a State Department press release declaring the formation of his government. Latortue's appointment was announced shortly after Aristide had been hustled onto an airplane and flown into exile in the Central African Republic.

Team Members: Latortue and Powell

A recent example of Latortue's ineptitude was his hapless response to Tropical Storm Jeanne, the natural tragedy that took several thousand lives on the island and cost tens of millions of dollars in personal and public property loss. While the storm was raging, Latortue and his confederates were not even competent enough to take the basic step of establishing an emergency national radio grid over which they could have broadcast calls to the population to go to high ground in order to escape from the flooding. This abdication of responsibility alone should have been enough to justify calling for his and his colleague's resignations.

In addition to Latortue, Secretary of State Colin Powell was quick to blame last week's street violence on supporters of Aristide's Lavalas Party, stating that "These are the old Aristide elements and some criminal elements who are trying to take advantage of the situation." However, protesters present at the demonstration claim that it was the police who first opened fire on a crowd of, at that time, unarmed pro-Aristide militants.

What Powell refuses to acknowledge is that the recent violence and protests in Haiti are not random acts, but are the direct result of popular resentment against the U.S.-executed coup d'etat which he authored, and which brought about the replacement of Aristide last February with someone whom the citizens view as an impostor. Haitians are also outraged over the manner in which Latortue has embraced rather than condemned the island's ex-military and rebel police who have persecuted thousands of Lavalas members, solely on the basis of their political beliefs. In Latortue's first public appearance as prime minister, he went so far as to acclaim Haiti's rebel leaders—many of whom are now highly regarded by the current government for their gun-sliding abilities. He also praised thugs and FRAPH paramilitary death squad members, whom he has since referred to as "freedom fighters." This even sent his State Department godfathers into a free fall.

For and Against Aristide

For their part, rather than protecting Aristide and the principles of the constitutional government, U.S. Embassy officials, acting under the instructions of Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega, with the approval of Powell, skillfully stage-managed the removal of Aristide from the country. There was no confusion over what Washington wanted; a number of inter-agency meetings in Washington established that Noriega, hiding behind the phrase, "a high State Department source," had been lobbying to oust Aristide weeks before the president's eventual flight into exile.

The Bush administration's strategy was to rid itself once and for all of that meddling troublemaker, choosing to avail itself of Aristide's desperate situation, on the eve of his departure. Not only did Powell refuse to authorize peacekeepers to be sent to protect Aristide and Port-au-Prince, but he would not even authorize the shipment of tear gas and other riot control devices necessary to preserve law and order and control the security situation. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the majority of Haitians today are alienated by and deeply suspicious of Washington's motives in imposing an unelected government of its own choosing upon them. They also resent foreign troops being brought in to maintain discipline over the population while a jerry-rigged ballot is prepared, in which most likely neither Aristide nor his main political allies will be allowed to take part.

Public protests are one of the few mechanisms at hand for the poor to voice their discontent. Moreover, many Haitians are mystified over who Latortue actually is, aside from being a long-time resident of Boca Raton, Florida, and not having been a Haitian resident for decades. Most Haitians still consider Aristide to be their only legitimate leader. Alix Jean, a Lavalas supporter, captured the sentiment of many Haitians when he noted that, "We believe in democracy, and we have a democratically elected leader. His name is Jean-Bertrand Aristide."

Friends and Foes

Moreover, Haitians are not alone in their refusal to acquiesce to the U.S. hybrid government. In spite of Washington's pressure on the leadership of Guyana, Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, as part of an overall strategy to reintegrate the now U.S. satellite into CARICOM's regional trade bloc activities, these doughty mini-nations have refused to interact with the Latortue government. At this point, CARICOM—although a number of its members are in favor of lifting Haiti's suspension—will not move to reintegrate Latortue's regime as a CARICOM member until the matter is brought up at its next scheduled meeting. Why then did Powell expect fiercely nationalist Haitians to meekly accept a U.S.-dependent government without displaying their fury in one of the few methods still available to them—street demonstrations?

Why They Protest

In fact, many patriotic Haitians consider it nothing less than their duty to manifest their chagrin over the shrouded departure of their lawful president. Despite the Bush administration's ultimate responsibility for Haiti's current morass, Powell has joined Latortue in blaming Aristide supporters for the turmoil that is increasingly gripping the small Caribbean nation. The record, however, speaks differently. The Latortue government—and for that matter the U.S.-installed and led emergency peacekeeping unit and then the current U.N. interim peacekeepers—characteristically have stood idly by and watched as a rising tide of pro-Aristide Haitians have been harassed, arrested, tortured and, in many instances, killed for their political dissent and support of Aristide. In a San Francisco Bay View article, Haitian expert Anthony Fenton cited the July 19 publication of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti in which it was reported that, "Morgue employees from the General Hospital in Port-au-Prince have revealed that 800 bodies on Sunday, March 7, and another 200 bodies on Sunday, March 28, were dumped and buried in a mass grave at Titanyen. These figures are unusual for such a short period of time (100 is normal for a month)." The document continued to note that, "Interviewees have reported that the victims were supporters of Aristide or Haiti's former constitutional

government.”

Another example of the interim government’s single-minded persecution of Lavalas supporters—much of it under the watch of one of Latortue’s most diabolical cabinet figures, Justice Minister Bernard Gousse—was the detention of former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune on July 27, 2004. After nearly three months in hiding, Neptune was detained and imprisoned in the national penitentiary on invented charges to ensure that he would not be able to participate in the upcoming 2005 elections. “There’s no case against [Neptune],” charged U.S. Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D-CA) in an interview with the Council on Hemispheric Affairs. It was “unconscionable that he [Neptune] has been arrested—this is another attempt by the puppet government to cut off the head of Lavalas.”

Amnesty International echoed Congresswoman Waters’ interpretation in a stinging indictment of the Latortue government’s behavior last June. The organization claimed that, “The interim government has swiftly moved to arrest members of former President Aristide’s Lavalas Family Party suspected of acts of political violence or corruption. However, the government has failed to act against a number of convicted perpetrators of grave human rights violations who were freed from prison before or during the recent insurgency... None of them have been re-arrested, and a few are reportedly terrorizing their victims and others involved in their prosecution.”

***This analysis was prepared by Jenna Michelle Liut and Larry Birns, respectively
COHA Research Associate and Director.***

October 13, 2004

The Council on Hemispheric Affairs, founded in 1975, is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan, tax-exempt research and information organization. It has been described on the Senate floor as being “one of the nation’s most respected bodies of scholars and policy makers.” For more information, please see our web page at www.coha.org; or contact our Washington offices by phone (202) 223-4975, fax (202) 223-4979, or email coha@coha.org.