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Storm-Battered Haiti's Endless Crises Deepen

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, Oct. 12 - Marguerite Dorima, seven months pregnant in a faded yellow sundress, slogged through the muddy, fetid waters that still occupied the heart of Gonaïves last weekend, three weeks after Tropical Storm Jeanne provoked flash floods that killed some 1,900 people and left 900 missing and presumed dead.

With one hand on her white lace head scarf and the other on her bulging belly, Ms. Dorima maneuvered the slippery muck with the aid of makeshift bridges made of splintery boards and discarded plastic jugs. She was determined to make it to a food distribution center to get rice and beans to last her family of eight through another week.

But there would be no handouts that day. In an act of supreme political miscalculation, the daily distribution of food had been suspended because Haiti's provisional president and prime minister were coming to town to mourn the victims of the tropical storm.

On learning this, Ms. Dorima sighed and peered at the white tanks encircling the city's imposing cathedral, where a "symbolic Mass" was to about to take place for the dead who had been unceremoniously buried, together with some goats and cows, in a mass grave at the edge of town. Ms. Dorima was grieving for her 7-year-old niece, Jean-Claudine, but she had not known about the memorial service and, exhausted, did not attend.

Few did. Instead, a large, ragtag group gathered outside to shout its frustration with the caretaker government's response to the disaster. Their chants of "Liars! Thieves!" drowned out the worshipers singing "Take pity on me, Lord, take pity on your people." And as the politicians flew back to the capital after failing to audibly address the crowd, the angry men vented their rage by burning tires and shooting.

The storm's devastation of Gonaïves, Haiti's third-largest city, has exposed the continuing fragility of Haiti seven months after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, facing a mounting revolt by former military officers and rebels, resigned under international pressure.

In the wake of the storm, a surge of bloody unrest in the slums of Port-au-Prince, the capital, has laid bare the country's continuing volatility, too. The violence grew out of

demonstrations by Mr. Aristide's supporters to mark the Sept. 30 anniversary of a military coup that toppled him during his first term in office, and some of it has been especially grisly. A former military official's headless, castrated body was left to decompose near the capital's port last week.

This week, tensions escalated even further, when former military officials, who now control several provincial towns despite the fact that their army was disbanded in 1995, pledged to gather in the capital to confront the violence. With new pro-Aristide demonstrations scheduled for Saturday, Port-au-Prince was bracing for a fresh round of bloodshed over the weekend.

These twin crises, natural and political, underscore the immensity of the underlying challenges that the country faces. Haiti's ravaged environment would require decades of sustained effort to repair, and reforming the culture of impunity in which the ruthless armed gangs thrive would require a long-term international commitment to lifting Haiti, the poorest country in the hemisphere, out of its despair.

But, as is often the case, Haiti's emergencies take precedence, and the emergencies now are in Gonaïves, where international aid efforts have been hampered by widespread looting, and in Port-au-Prince, where the specter of a direct battle between former military officers and militant supporters of Mr. Aristide looms.

Haiti has effectively been in international receivership since Feb. 29, when Mr. Aristide, the country's first democratically elected president, was placed on a Pentagon jet into exile. But its transitional government, even with the bolstering of a United Nations peacekeeping force and more than \$1 billion in pledged international aid, is inherently weak just as the destructive forces here are strong. International officials here fear that the current unrest could profoundly undermine the world's fledgling - and some here say halfhearted - effort to steer Haiti toward reconstruction, reconciliation and elections in 2005.

Of primary concern, there are still large numbers of weapons on the streets. The American marines who, with French legionnaires, took over Haiti's security after Mr. Aristide's ouster did restore order, but they did not undertake a serious disarmament effort before turning security control over to United Nations peacekeepers in June. So far the United Nations troops have not done so either.

Gérard Latortue, a Florida resident who was chosen as Haiti's interim prime minister by an American-backed council of prominent Haitians in March, recently described how he begged Secretary of State Colin L. Powell not to withdraw the marines all at once. "Unfortunately, the Americans preferred to send their troops elsewhere, forgetting their neighborhood," Mr. Latortue said in a speech in Miami.

Many other countries dragged their heels on committing the forces that they pledged to

the United Nations. The peacekeeping force will be outnumbered by armed thugs even at its promised strength of 8,300 soldiers and civilian police officers. But the force is still not even at half-strength.

This greatly troubles officials in Haiti, since development efforts hinge on security.

"I'm afraid of a continued deterioration in the security situation," said Adama Guindo, resident coordinator for the United Nations in Haiti. "The international community must remain engaged to help stabilize this country. Haiti cannot live on emergency aid alone."

The Rising Waters

In the early evening of Sept. 18, Héber Pélissier, president of the local chamber of commerce, stood on the second-floor balcony of his home and watched in horror as the waters suddenly rose.

"The water took several cars with it, and then the panic started," he said. "It began to get dark, and I heard cries: 'Help me, I am going to die, save me, I am drowning.' "

As water swallowed the first story of his house, bodies began floating by and he felt helpless, he said. He gathered his family around him, and they prayed.

"I had this belief deep inside me that there is a limit to the fury of God," Mr. Pélissier, a broad-shouldered man with salt-and-pepper hair, said last weekend, choking back a single sob. "I said to God, 'Many have died here. This is it. We don't want any more to die.' "

Mr. Pélissier speculated that God was punishing his town for its perpetual leading role in Haiti's violent history. Gonaïves was the birthplace of Haiti's independence 200 years ago, the seat of the uprising against the 30-year Duvalier government and the kickoff zone for the revolt against Mr. Aristide.

Recently, Gonaïves, a city of 250,000 that was once a flourishing cotton center, has been a lawless haven for gangs and rebels, so turbulent that its schools have essentially been shuttered since November 2003. While some places in Haiti have environmental and disaster plans, Gonaïves is not one of them. "Nature decided that it was payback time for the bad management of ecological problems in the Gonaïves area," said Prime Minister Latortue, a native of the city.

Extreme environmental degradation, especially deforestation, has made Haiti extremely susceptible to natural disaster. When rainwater rushes downstream unfettered by trees, catchment areas or drains, it sets off deadly flash floods.

It did not take a hurricane or even a particularly strong tropical storm to wash away or

destroy thousands of homes in Gonaïves. Many still standing are surrounded by moats of chocolate-colored water, and many residents are living on their roofs amid crushed bed frames and brightly hued piles of sodden clothing. Tens of thousands are completely homeless, like Ms. Dorima's sister, whose husband left her after their little girl was "lost to the waters."

"All she has left to her name is one pair of panties," Ms. Dorima said.

Pigs roam the muddy streets, nosing around in piles of rotting garbage. Many alleyways have become filthy canals, turning Gonaïves into a putrid version of Venice. On the outskirts, almost all crops were destroyed and livestock drowned.

Noel Madiro Morilus, an agriculture official, traveled to the cathedral on Saturday to "launch an urgent S O S" for Terre-Neuve, his region of some 25,000 north of Gonaïves that had yet to receive any aid or official visits.

"Please get us help," he urged an American journalist, who brought his concerns to a United Nations official's attention. "We have hundreds of homeless, many are running constant fevers, the children have bumps on their skin. Seventeen people have died, and more are dying. We are drinking unpurified water and we have nothing to eat."

A Spike in Violence

Rival armed groups and gangs began flexing their muscles over the summer, as crimes like carjacking increased, a full-dress military parade took place in the capital and pro-Aristide militants staged a brief showdown with international forces in Cité-Soleil, a Port-au-Prince slum.

The spike in violence, however, began precisely on Sept. 30, when supporters of Mr. Aristide marched to demand his return.

Mr. Aristide and his wife just accepted appointments as research fellows at the University of South Africa, indicating they have settled in there. But he has said he was forced to leave Haiti, and his supporters - the slum-based populist movement called Lavalas, which means cleansing flood - want Mr. Aristide, a former priest, to finish out his second term in office, which was supposed to end in 2005.

The Sept. 30 march began peacefully, but gunfire erupted, setting off bloody battles between the Haitian police and Aristide supporters. Each side blamed the other for starting the violence, which has created a worrisome climate of insecurity ever since.

Like Tropical Storm Jeanne, which hit a city where no one was really in charge, the violence has underscored the tenuousness of the interim government's control. Hastily assembled in March under American supervision, the government has no political power

base, except in the tiny elite, which considers it professional.

Mr. Latortue, 70, an impeccably dressed man who keeps his nails well buffed, is a self-described technocrat who moved back to Haiti from Boca Raton, Fla., to take up his post. In a fiercely divided society with more than 90 political parties, Mr. Latortue, a former United Nations official, says he is nonpartisan. "We just want a national reconciliation until elections can take place in 2005," he said.

But the government has come to be seen by many here, including some international officials, as partial toward the former military and anti-Lavalas. Mr. Latortue himself saluted a former rebel leader as a "freedom fighter," and, in a hasty, overnight trial, his government exonerated another rebel leader of his notoriously violent past.

Mr. Latortue's government has allowed former military officers and rebels to take charge or remain in charge of several towns, including Petit-Goâve, where, dressed in their old uniforms, former soldiers have installed themselves in the police station. The government also appeased former soldiers by signing an agreement to create a bureau of former military officials, pay pensions, hand out security jobs and study the idea of reviving a Haitian army.

In exchange, the former soldiers agreed to give up their weapons. But they have not been pressed to do so. And this week, ex-soldiers who helped topple Mr. Aristide were issuing increasingly bellicose statements about the violence roiling the capital, boasting of new recruits and plans to march on the capital.

"Someone needs to take control," Guy Philippe, 36, a rebel leader who is considered one of the most influential former military officials, said in an interview last week. But he also said he himself was "not in the mood" to pick up arms again.

Some international officials here believe that Mr. Latortue is handling the former military with kid gloves while others see it as finesse. But many are concerned about what they see as the current Haitian government's tendency to vilify Lavalas, which still has significant popular support. This, they say, is creating antagonism rather than courting compromise.

Among Mr. Aristide's supporters, passions have been inflamed by the recent arrests of several Lavalas leaders. Louis Gérald Gilles, one of them, said in an interview after his release that he saw his arrest as part of a concerted effort to discredit and eliminate Lavalas.

"They interrogated us and suggested we were the intellectual authors of the violence," Dr. Gilles, a surgeon, said. "But we are not. Every sector in our society has its extremists, including Lavalas. Every sector uses guns to destroy democracy in Haiti. Lavalas remains the most popular party. It is unwise to treat us as the root of all evil

because it is a way of disdaining the people."

Caught in the middle of these roiling emotions is the risk-adverse, understaffed United Nations peacekeeping force.

Starting last week, United Nations troops and Haitian police officers carried out joint raids aimed at flushing out militants. They arrested more than 120 people. But they seized few weapons, at least partly because some Haitian police officers leaked news of the raids before they took place, Gen. Augusto Heleno Pereira of Brazil, the commander of the United Nations peacekeepers here, said in an interview.

Jean-Claude Bajoux, who served in Mr. Aristide's first cabinet but later turned against him, said the joint operations were not serving any real purpose if they did not take guns off the streets. "You have to block a sector for 24 hours, shut it down, then go from house to house," Mr. Bajoux said. "If there is no will or appetite to do this, then the U.N. should leave."

But General Heleno said that a forceful disarmament operation in a congested shantytown was a delicate task, and that he did not want to increase tensions or cause civilian deaths. He would prefer to persuade people to give up their arms rather than to take them by force, anyway, he said.

A Struggle for Food

In Gonaïves, the distribution of food has created heartrending scenes. Large crowds of women wait shoulder to shoulder for hours under a broiling sun, pushed up against barbed wire and surrounded by peacekeeping troops, some in riot gear. Faint from heat and hunger, the women jostle and tumble, desperate to get their rations before the day's supply runs out.

From the start of the relief effort, supply trucks have struggled over severely damaged roads, fording a three-foot-deep lake at the edge of town. They have been stopped by flaming barricades and have suffered considerable looting. Last week, the violence in Port-au-Prince closed the port for several days, blocking aid shipments.

CARE officials said that their food supplies were dwindling and that, with some peacekeeping troops heading back to Port-au-Prince to deal with the violence there, they were very concerned about security. They were planning to cut their food distribution to two sites from four.

Last weekend, they did not distribute any food at all. On Saturday, the local government decided that it needed to divert security to protect the politicians and on Sunday, local officials said they were "too tired from the president's visit," Joseph Jouthe of CARE said.

During the Mass, the president and the prime minister sat stiffly side by side in black armchairs in front of the pews. Afterward, they tried to address the restive crowd outside. They ascended to a balcony and the figurehead president, Boniface Alexandre, began to speak through a small, tinny loudspeaker. He was inaudible, and the people chanted, "We can't hear you."

The two provisional politicians then descended, ringed by security. After another brief, unsuccessful effort to communicate using the inadequate megaphone, they climbed in their cars and drove off, effectively leaving a former rebel leader in charge. Before long, tires were flaming and gunshots rang through the air.

Through the afternoon, in the tense streets of a city that has sparked so many rebellions, young men drummed on empty water jugs and chanted the songs they used to sing against Mr. Aristide, changing the target to vent their latest fury.

"Whether he wants to or not," they shouted, again and again, "Boniface must go."