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HAITI

As violence swells, so do fears of a civil war

NOTE: The photographs contained in this article may be considered disturbing to some readers.

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PORT-AU-PRINCE - Gunfire crackles most nights in Haiti's capital, and each morning the police tally the dead, hoping they won't find another of their own. Businesses regularly close during the day, fearing more riots.

The government blames armed supporters of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and the exiled Aristide himself, for the violence that has killed several dozen. Aristide loyalists say it's the government that is unsettling the masses with repression.

Added to the mix are the armed rebels who helped oust Aristide, lurking on the outskirts of the city and threatening to join the fray. And then there are the U.N. peacekeepers struggling to keep a lid on things without disarming anyone -- it's not part of their assignment, they say.

Political violence, fear and finger-pointing have become normal in already storm-devastated Haiti, and some fear an all-out civil war.

"If something isn't done soon, we're headed to civil war," said Gracien Jean, a political analyst who says he never supported Aristide but is disgruntled with the current government. "It's inevitable. As long as Aristide is out of the country, he will continue to mobilize his forces to destabilize the country. But . . . this government is not democratic. It is controlled by the extreme right and represents very few. And the violence isn't only from Aristide's forces. It is from both sides."

56 PEOPLE DEAD

Since Sept. 30, when a pro-Aristide rally turned bloody, 56 have been killed. Six were police officers, several of them beheaded. More than 100 have been arrested, among them a priest once based in Miami and several politicians loyal to Aristide.

The violence came atop Tropical Storm Jeanne's destruction, which killed some 2,000 people in and around Gonaives. Relief efforts for the thousands left homeless and hungry by the disaster are periodically curtailed or suspended due to security problems.

The U.S.-backed government of interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue says it is doing all it can and claims it is only acting to restore order. Officials throw all the blame for the violence on Aristide and his supporters.

Latortue even scolded the president of South Africa recently for allowing Aristide to direct his supporters from his exile there, but offered no proof. The South African government vehemently denied the charge, as has Aristide.

Aristide supporters claim they aren't even in contact with the ousted president and insist the killings would stop if the government would just leave them alone.

"There are some things we want to talk to him about, but unfortunately, we have no contact with him," said Jean Marie Samedy, leader of a group that organizes protests to demand Aristide's return.

A RESPONSE

Samedy said the violence is a spontaneous response to government repression. He claimed that he and other leaders of Aristide's Lavalas Family party were trying to calm the situation but that people in some areas, like the pro-Aristide slum of Bel Air, were too angry to be contained. "In Bel Air, the provocation from the government is so strong," he said.

``That's why we can't get control of it."

He scoffed at government claims that Aristide supporters mounted a violent "Operation Baghdad," beheading police officers to force out the U.N. peacekeepers brought in after the former president was ousted in February.

"The government talked about an operation called Baghdad so they can get the sympathy of the United States so they can restore a dictatorship in Haiti," he said. ``We know the U.S. government won't collaborate with terrorism. The government wants to humiliate Lavalas."

Samedy said he was being followed by armed men that he believes are from the government.

Anger in pro-Aristide areas of the capital has only been fueled by the arrests of Aristide supporters, Samedy said.

The government has refused to make public any evidence that led to the arrests of the Rev. Gerard Jean-Juste and three Lavalas politicians. Government officials declined interviews on the arrests or the security situation.

Michael Lucius, chief of the judicial police, would only say that the government is trying to restore order so that elections can be held next year.

'Of course we are persecuting people -- armed gangsters who cut off police officers' heads," he said. ``They are burning stores, killing children's parents. We are persecuting them with justice. We cannot build a democratic state with gangsters who think they are above the law terrorizing the population."

FORMER REBELS WAIT

As for the former rebels, many of them soldiers in the army Aristide disbanded in 1995, they are gathered on the outskirts of the capital, arms at ready, increasing tensions. The government's disarmament negotiations with them stalled in mid-September.

U.N. officials say their stretched forces are doing all they can to keep a lid on the violence, but that it's not their mission to disarm the various factions. That's a police function, they say.

The police say they are outgunned and have recovered only 50 percent of the manpower they lost in February during the rebellion that toppled Aristide. They admit they can't effectively patrol most neighborhoods, and don't even go in some.

GUN DEAL

The interim government announced this month that it was negotiating to buy guns for the police, despite a 13-year-old U.S. arms embargo. The United States has said the embargo stays, but it would consider specific requests from the interim government.

It is unclear how much popular support the interim government or Aristide really has, or how much true opposition there is to the peacekeepers. In the hemisphere's poorest nation, many are just struggling to survive.

"I wish the U.S. Marines would come in and bring peace to our country," television repairman Lucien Montperoesse said recently as he and other men waited on a deserted Port-au-Prince street. ``It's been two weeks since I've worked."

One Haitian businessman blamed Aristide for the violence -- and the interim government for its inability to contain it.

"We can't go on without security," he said, asking that his name not be used for fear of reprisals. ``If business can't function, people can't work and they take matters into their own hands.

``Basically, the interim government is powerless. Right now, there is no mission. There's no plan. . . . It's basically a free-for-all."

Herald staff writer Jacqueline Charles contributed to this report.