

Council On Hemispheric Affairs

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Buying Off Haiti's "Thugs" Washington still supports Latortue's Failed State

- There is an emerging consensus that Haiti's interim government is a bankrupt regime.
- Payments to ex-soldiers reward violence and is a pure case of succumbing to extortion.
- Washington does not deign to comment on the Haitian ex-military's successful extortion even though it helps to pay the bill.

For months, the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) has been calling attention to the incompetence, irresponsibility and blatantly lawless practices of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue's interim government in Haiti. Though COHA has repeatedly referred to Haiti as a "failed state," the national press has methodically ignored the regime's capacity for corruption, profligacy, extensive human rights violations and systematic flouting of the rule of law. Recently, however, a consensus has begun to emerge among international policymakers that Latortue and his rogue Justice Minister, Bernard Gousse, are indeed leading a failed state, replete with multiple assaults against basic democratic institutions. As reported on January 2 by Michael Kamber in the New York Times, one of the interim prime minister's own officials stated, on condition of anonymity, "Latortue is not serious about the security situation. The civil wars in Somalia and Lebanon started like this and that's where we are heading." Added to this already explosive situation was the manner in which the Latortue regime botched preparations for Tropical Storm Jeanne in which several thousand Haitians lost their lives, and the chaotic manner in which he handled its aftermath.

Bribing Thugs

One of the most distressing developments in Latortue's mishandling of his governmental responsibilities was his recent decision to virtually bribe members of the ex-military in the hope of appeasing these perpetrators of violence. Last month the government began paying off the 5,000 ex-members of the Haitian military after a number of them had raided and set up shop in Aristide's former Port-au-Prince residence. A longstanding demand of the soldiers was to be compensated for the period since Aristide disbanded the military in 1994, a move that was roundly welcomed at the time by Haitians. The situation

has now become all but surreal: an illegal and rogue military force that had been disbanded by Aristide for its hideous human rights abuses under the 1991 – 1994 military dictatorship of General Raoul Cedras has now intimidated Latortue into paying them five thousand dollars each for having murdered up to six thousand civilians during the period of military rule.

Dereliction of Duty

The disbursement of such bribes to the ex-military, particularly after the brutality they displayed to pro-Aristide civilians in the month preceding the February 29, 2004 ouster of Aristide, is just one of the many reasons why the Southern Command of the United States army now refers to the regime as “the now-discredited Latortue government.” Astoundingly, Latortue has claimed he does not have a mandate for dealing with the ex-military. In response, one could say that Latortue has no mandate to exercise any authority whatsoever since he was installed by the U.S. under a hastily provided, but entirely fabricated scenario. Moreover, under the command of Brazilian General Augusto Heleno, the U.N.’s Mission Force in Haiti, MINUSTAH, is not prepared to take on the ex-Haitian army either: Heleno has declared, “I command a peacekeeping force, not an occupation force.”

It is patently clear that the time has come to transfer MINUSTAH into an occupying force – or whatever terminology is required to satisfy General Heleno – in order to end the malignant threat posed by leaders of the former Haitian armed forces. If not, it will continue to pose a mortal danger to civil society. As things now stand, the ex-army is growing in power daily and may use extortionist means to hold up the election next November or, at the least, keep Aristide’s Lavalas party supporters from the polls, particularly if there is any interruption in payments to the ex-armed forces.

This already emboldened “band of thugs,” to use Secretary Powell’s words from only days before Aristide’s ouster, can only further erode the UN’s credibility so long as Latortue plays lap dog to the former coup plotters. A renewed mandate for MINUSTAH must include the authority to go after Haiti’s ex-military. Until then, it will only be perceived by the Haitian people as the international wing of Latortue’s ineffectual and corrupt regime.

This opinion-editorial was authored by COHA Senior Research Fellow, Seth R. DeLong, Ph.D.

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