



A year after start of rebellion that ousted Aristide, insecurity and poverty still bedevil Haiti

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) - Haiti's normally raucous carnival became an afterthought this time last year as a ragtag band of gangsters joined by ex-soldiers set off on a deadly march that led to the ouster of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

As the international community agonized over whether to intervene, fighting and looting destroyed an already weak infrastructure and those who could, fled.

Today, an interim government installed under the watch of a U.S. led-multinational force has called elections late this year, and 7,400 U.N. troops who replaced the Americans patrol the country.

"Last February, we were in a period of people burning down stores, you couldn't even go downtown," said David Bazile, secretary of public security. "Today, we are talking about carnival."

The way people are talking about carnival, however, provides a window into a deteriorating security situation that some fear could bring civil war.

Few revelers showed up as the annual pre-Lenten fete kicked off on Sunday, the anniversary of the rebellion that began in northwest Gonaives city.

"This is depressing," 39-year-old gardener Edward Leonel said of the low attendance. "With all the problems this year, I think most people just decided to stay home."

Hundreds of Haitian police and U.N. soldiers lined the two-mile parade route, which was shortened by half this year to avoid volatile areas such as the Aristide stronghold of Bel Air. No disturbances were reported Sunday evening.

The few people who did attend were treated to a parade of snake charmers with large boa constrictors coiled around their necks, young men snapping whips as they skipped through the streets and women in brightly colored traditional clothes marching in formation with large baskets atop their heads.

The men who forced out Haiti's first democratically elected president remain armed and may yet get their demand for the restoration of the disgraced army blamed for coups and the killings and maimings of thousands before Aristide disbanded it in 1995.

Not even they were celebrating Sunday: "We can't celebrate when we have so much work left to do," said one rebel leader, Remissainthe Ravix. "Aristide has left, but we still have many problems."

Since Aristide supporters intensified protests in September to demand his return from exile in South Africa, more than 250 people have been killed in shootouts involving street gangs, police, U.N. peacekeepers and protesters.

Gangs loyal to Aristide retain control of populous slums that are home to some of the hundreds of thousands who refuse to recognize the interim government of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue -- a technocrat brought home from years in exile in Florida to run the country -- as does the 14-nation Caribbean Community.

It has asked for an international investigation into Aristide's charges that the United States forced him out. U.S. officials say they did not help Aristide keep power because he was profiting from a still brisk business in cocaine smuggling -- charges Aristide denies.

Latortue, in turn, denies that his government is conducting a witchhunt that has scores of officials and supporters of Aristide's Lavalas Family party in overcrowded jails.

"They are not in jail because of being Lavalas members or supporters ... (but) because they broke the law," said police spokeswoman Gessy Coicou. Most arrests have been illegal and few people have been charged.

Lavalas says it will boycott the elections, which would further polarize the country.

Justice is as elusive as peace in Haiti. On Saturday, two bodies lay in the middle of a busy road. Police said the two men were bludgeoned by a crowd after they tried to steal a wallet.

"We cannot change the country without a change in the (corrupt) justice system," said Pierre Esperance of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights.

Others say disarmament is more urgent. U.N. officials are negotiating with the government on a plan to disarm all factions though the Brazilian commander in charge of peacekeepers, Lt. Gen. Augusto Heleno Ribeiro, has other priorities.

"The arms market is strong across the world, we cannot fight it," he said. "So we must show people we don't need arms. We must show them hope in terms of economic and social life."

His mission, and the cash-strapped interim government, was sidetracked for months by deadly floods in May and September that killed thousands and left more missing.

Business leaders say Latortue's government has balanced the budget and normalized foreign debt payments but created no new jobs for the two-thirds of the work force that is unemployed or scrape by on odd jobs.

"When you seen financial improvement (in fiscal management) but not business improvement, the situation can deteriorate and become dangerous," said Claude Beauboeuf, executive director of the Haitian Chamber of Commerce.

In July, several countries and international institutions promised Haiti more than US\$1 billion, but only about US\$200 million has been disbursed.

Philippe Armand, president of the American Chamber of Commerce of Haiti, was hopeful about opening a Florida chapter next month to help exiles set up business in their homeland.

"There is a better business climate now," he said, "a sense we're moving toward elections and will finally put the country back on its feet."

Ordinary Haitians don't agree.

"Either there has been no change since Aristide left, or things are worse," said Car Monique, a 35-year-old mother of five children who sells moonshine. "It seems like even more people are without jobs now."

(pp-maf/sj)