

HAITI

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Disbanded army reasserts itself, wins the support of many Haitians

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PETIT GOAVE, Haiti - (KRT) - Behind crude stone barricades and loops of razor wire, the former soldiers stand guard at their posts, assault rifles loaded.

Inside the base, in the cool shade of a giant mango tree, a wiry drill sergeant leads some 100 men through morning exercises as others mill about in their fatigues.

So goes what might be considered a typical day for the Haitian army - if there were one.

Ten years ago, former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide disbanded the dreaded Armed Forces of Haiti - the perpetrators of numerous coups, including one against him, and some of the worst human rights abuses in the hemisphere.

Now, nearly a year after ex-soldiers led a revolt that ousted Aristide, they control much of the countryside and Haiti's second-largest city, Cap-Haitien, posing a serious challenge to U.N. peacekeepers trying to restore the rule of law.

They have no more legal authority than any of the other armed gangs that wreak havoc throughout Haiti. But unlike other groups, they wear

uniforms and brandish their weapons in public, with little repercussion to themselves.

Even in the capital, where the U.N. presence is strongest, they linger in front of the abandoned suburban hotel they turned into their base, openly armed with AK-47 knock-offs, M-1 and M-14 rifles, handguns and at least one grenade launcher.

They have clashed with police and allegedly kidnapped four officers recently in an attempt to extort the release of several of their own from prison. Three of the officers were subsequently handed over to peacekeepers, a U.N. source said.

While Aristide was widely praised for disbanding the armed forces, many Haitians have actually welcomed them back, saying they keep the peace - even as foreign diplomats fear they will disrupt elections scheduled for November.

Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue has treaded lightly on the issue.

After a standoff in December at Aristide's abandoned home, which ex-soldiers seized and occupied for two days, the government agreed to their demands for a decade of back pay - with no requirement that they give up their guns.

"Money first, disarmament later; it's crazy," said one senior Western diplomat here. "Where (is the government) even getting this money?"

The government began issuing checks last month and plans to make three \$1,000 payments to as many as 8,000 former soldiers.

The estimated \$24 million that the program could cost is a huge and curious expenditure in a poor country whose bank accounts were tapped dry by misspending and corruption.

If the soldiers don't give up their weapons, the 7,400 Brazilian-led U.N. peacekeepers said they would accomplish the task by force.

"We are ready to do the operation," said Brazilian Navy Cmdr. Carlos Chagas Braga, No. 2 in the U.N. force command. "We just want to make sure we have all the conditions to minimize civilian casualties."

"The former military is a very sensitive issue here in Haiti," he said.

Ten years of violence during the reign of Aristide's Lavalas party has dulled once widespread abhorrence of the military.

In December, a group of Sri Lankan peacekeepers based in Petit Goave tried to oust the ex-soldiers from the main police station. A mob of

supporters surrounded the Sri Lankans and began throwing rocks.

When the peacekeepers fired in the air to restore order, the ex-soldiers fired at them, wounding one in the arm. The U.N. force retreated to its base a mile away.

The ex-soldiers appear to be well armed. In 1995, shortly after Aristide was restored to power by U.S. troops following a coup four years before, he accused Washington of allowing the former soldiers to keep tens of thousands of heavy weapons in secret arsenals.

Aristide's detractors counter that he always had control of the weapons and distributed some of them to young loyalists in the slums, who went on to cause much of the violence in recent years.

The rebels who forced Aristide to resign Feb. 29, 2004, constituted an odd meeting of the two armed camps - former soldiers and slum dwellers from the city of Gonaives who had turned against Aristide. They claim they picked up thousands of weapons as police fled their posts during the revolt.

They now say the army is a valid entity under the Haitian Constitution and that Aristide's disbanding of it in 1995 was illegal.

"I'd rather die than leave this post," said self-proclaimed Commander in Chief Ravix Remissainthe recently, sitting in his Port-au-Prince office with two 9 mm pistols and an AK-47 knockoff laid across his desk.

Remissainthe is now a wanted man, charged with attacking public and private buildings after taking over Aristide's former home.

Justice Minister Bernard Gousse has said Remissainthe in fact was not even in the army when Aristide disbanded it - he had been fired for drug trafficking in 1993.

But to some Haitians, Remissainthe and his men are keeping the peace at a time when the thinly staffed Haitian National Police has yet to control many places.

"We love this country," Remissainthe said. "Our main objective is to make sure everyone can move about at their will and the tourists can come back."

He proposes that a new army would be professional and apolitical, not prone to the power grabs and massacres of the past. Latortue and Interior Minister Herard Abraham have said they favor reinstating the military.

Many of the ex-soldiers, as well as impostors who have joined them, now

act as if that has already happened.

In Petit Goave, 40 miles west of Port-au-Prince, they took over the police station last summer and repainted it as the "Headquarters of the Armed Forces of Haiti."

"If the new government doesn't decide to reinstate the army, they will have to come take us out of here," said Louites Isaac, 44. "Because we're staying."

The city of 50,000 has suffered extraordinary violence in the last few years, riven by pro- and anti-Aristide armed gangs and ordinary criminals alike.

Just last month, a man and a woman were found beheaded, and a mob shot to death two police officers and set their bodies on fire.

"We went into the area and made an investigation and arrested five people," said Wilso Felix, the former army soldier who now commands the base here.

When The Miami Herald visited last month, Felix's men conducted drills in the back courtyard, marching and running in place. Some of the old men looked on with nostalgic pride.

In the jail, a guard in an oversized riot helmet kept an eye on two prisoners locked in the barest of cells. One was accused of stealing three goats, another of taking a moped.

Residents say the ex-military's presence has helped to maintain order in recent months.

"The only people who keep the security is the army," said Madeline Anselen, 20. "But the government wants to put them out."

Anselen doesn't remember the army of old, the one that carried out an election day massacre in 1987 that killed 34, that ousted Aristide in 1991, that allegedly helped murder up to 50 people in Gonaives in 1994.

But that legacy does not die easily for those who suffered through it.

"They should get rid of them right away," said Desire Santanier, a welder who sells bed frames.

"They were the ones killing. They were the ones raping," said his friend, Roger Revolis, 58. "I'm old now, but I don't want them back. I don't want my children suffering all the things we suffered."

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