



Haiti's Top Political Prisoners Forced From Prison in Daylight Attack, Returned Next Day

By [Benjamin Melançon](#),

Posted on Sun Feb 20th, 2005 at 10:35:52 AM EST

In a daylight attack on the Haitian National Penitentiary in Port-au-Prince, men dressed in black and armed with assault rifles drove up and began firing into the air and at the prison, killing at least one guard, [Associated Press reported](#). Poorly armed prison guards fled, [reported Xinhau](#), the Chinese news agency. Hundreds of prisoners may have escaped after the attack, though the AP reported that dozens of police immediately swarmed around the prison, setting up roadblocks and searching cars.

Several witnesses said the gunmen took former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune and former Interior Minister Jocelerme Privert – held at the prison without charge or trial for many months – by force.

"I saw three gunmen escorting Neptune and several other prisoners," Jacques Dameus, who said he was in front of the prison at the time, [told Reuters](#). "When they arrived at the gate of the National Penitentiary, Neptune did not want to walk any further. One gunman raised his weapon and forced him to walk."

Neptune and Privert were later turned over to United Nations soldiers, a spokesman for the UN force in Haiti said, according to Xinhau. The UN promptly returned the two political prisoners to the coup government and to their cells in the National Penitentiary.

(This article was substantially revised Sunday at 6 p.m.)

Reuters, Associated Press, and Agence France Presse (AFP) all reported different, contradictory stories– all based on explanations from Haiti's coup government.

Police spokeswoman Gessy Coicou [told AP on Saturday](#) that authorities have no motive for the attack or suspects. Many motives and explanations have been offered since then.

In another article, AP writer Peter Prengaman [initially reported](#) that guards rushed the two jailed members of exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's administration to "a secret location when inmates began rioting." This claim, that prisoner riots prompted guards to move Neptune and Privert, was dropped in the later AP report.

Whoever took Neptune and Privert from their cells soon gave the two to the UN force, which (according to some reports) returned them to their imprisonment by the U.S.-installed post-coup government in Haiti. "They are now in the protective

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custody of the U.N.," spokesman Damian Onses-Cardona told the AP. "They have agreed to return to the prison."

Before the attack on the prison, media attention had been slowly turning to police killings of poor Haitians, continued paramilitary violence, and in particular the fraying of the alliance between the coup government and the paramilitaries—which may itself have been in part a result of the increasing media scrutiny.

Haitian government officials had accused paramilitary leader Remissainthe Ravix and his soldiers of killing four policemen. Last week, Ravix spoke to the media by cell phone. "I and my men have nothing to do with the killings," [http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N16201052.htm Reuters reported him saying]. "The government is made up of traitors. They praised us when we took up weapons to get rid of Aristide. Now that they are in power, they want to get rid of us."

Already this focus has changed, led by Agence France Presse. In an article titled "Haiti drug gang causes mass prison break-out, former ministers recaptured" at TurkishPress.com, an unnamed AFP reporter quoted an unnamed government official alleging that the jailbreak, including of the two jailed former government ministers, was an attempt by drug traffickers to make money. In fact, the jail is filled not with convicted drug traffickers but people held with no charge who mostly come from the poor neighborhoods where Haiti's exiled elected president had most of his support. Despite the eyewitness testimony cited by other news sources, AFP uncritically passed on the new official line that Neptune and Privert "took advantage of the chaos to escape."

Opponents of the coup government, according to a source in Haiti, suggested that the government staged the attack to distract from its failed effort to find Ravix and to manufacture a reason for a further crackdown on supporters of Aristide's Lavalas movement.

Indeed, the fact that more than 300 prisoners escaped on their own initiative during the attack may have been an accident not intended by the attackers, who appeared focused on capturing the jailed ministers and also leaving with a former soldier named Anel Belzaire, Reuters reported. The government has not come up with a credible explanation for the mass break, and initially did not acknowledge it, yet was instantly there to stop it. Prisoner director Claude Theodate originally said he couldn't confirm if any inmates had fled, however, dozens of police immediately swarmed around the prison, setting up roadblocks and searching cars, reported the Associated Press.

Witnesses said the 3:30 pm the attack was very well-organized. "It was an operation mounted from both the inside and outside," a guard told AFP.

If Neptune and Privert were forced out of the prison by the well-armed attackers, as most news agencies are now reporting, this does not seem possible without the assistance of prison guards. The two ministers from the last elected government do not appear to have been allowed to speak for themselves yet.

No possible motive has been presented that would explain opponents of the coup government carrying out the attack, and then turning over the leaders they were springing, yet this explanation seems to be the one that increasingly will be presented by the commercial media. The AFP claim that drug traffickers trying to make money from the prison break is equally implausible. The only explanation

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that makes sense is that this is a diversion to help the government and the paramilitaries get on with suppressing the supporters of democracy, who refuse to go away or be silent.

For the clearest reports from the attack on the prison are that Neptune and Privert did not leave voluntarily. Three men told police that gunmen escorting a man they recognized as Neptune had forced them to hand over their car and had driven him away in it, Reuters reported.

"I saw Neptune with my own eyes," said Ketel Jacob, who was in the car. "He seemed to be taken by force."

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by Benjamin Melançon on Mon Feb 21st, 2005 at 06:23:34 AM EST
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While it is always possible that pro-Aristide gangs attacked the Haitian National Penitentiary to free jailed members – presumably with the help of guards or even former military to pull it off – this remains an unlikely explanation given the facts known. Yet it is the most common explanation presented in media reports of the attack and jail break. Establishment press accounts that don't directly offer an explanation usually prominently mention the "re-capture" of Prime Minister Yvon Neptune and Interior Minister Jocelerme Privert – top officials of the overthrown elected government – and let the clear implication be that supporters of exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide undertook the attack to free these leaders.

Associated Press reporter Peter Prengaman, alone in the press, denies that any third party removed Neptune and Privert from the prison. Instead, he continues to report that guards secreted the two top political prisoners to a secure location during the attack. Prengaman cites unnamed authorities. In contemporaneous reports a government source even less credible than anonymous officials, police spokeswoman Gessy Coicou, repeats the escape-and-capture line. "Yvon Neptune and Jocelerme Privert have been apprehended," she told Agence France Press. In conflict with the escape claims, Reuters reporter Joseph Guyler Delva quoted eyewitnesses in front of the prison who reported seeing Prime Minister Neptune taken from the prison at gunpoint. The witnesses identified the kidnappers as the attackers, not guards, though Delva's Reuters version is at least conceivably reconcilable with Prengaman AP report.

Agence France Press has proved the worst of the wire services in covering this event. While none have provided coherent explanations, critical analysis, or key context, AFP has been malevolent in its misrepresentations. Each AFP article ends with a stock summary that lists year-old allegations against Aristide, including corruption and human rights violations, while mentioning none of the proven crimes of the pro-coup forces and presenting as mutual the constant, one-sided violence against people suspected of supporting the popular president. AFP repeats government allegations against Neptune and Privert without saying they have not been charged or faced with evidence despite being in jail since June and April, respectively.

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