



Former Haitian soldiers refusing to disarm endanger fall elections

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PETIT-GOAVE, Haiti (AP) - Bald, graying and, like their rusty pistols, long past their fighting prime, former soldiers who twice ousted Haiti's elected president are threatening a comeback that could jeopardize promised elections to put Haiti back on the road to democracy.

The ex-soldiers have challenged an interim government, agressed U.N. peacekeepers, and say they are poised for battle again if their demands are not met to reinstall Haiti's army, which led countless coups and counter-coups and aborted the Caribbean nation's first attempt at free elections in a bloodbath at the polls in 1987.

"This life is in our blood. It only took us a few months to get ready to fight Aristide, and now we are ready for whatever comes," said Sgt. Clement Mathurin Etienne as he called into formation a ragtag band of former soldiers toting aged pistols, Uzi machine guns and M14 rifles.

These are the men who helped force President Jean-Bertrand Aristide out of power in a bloody coup in 1991 and again in an armed rebellion that erupted a year ago. They continue to control much of Haiti's countryside and a handful of provincial towns, bucking calls by the interim government and the 7,400-member U.N. force to disarm.

"We are lifetime military people with a corps spirit," said Etienne, a 43-year-old drill sergeant with thick glasses, in between yelled marching orders to about 50 men. "It would be difficult for any force to make us disarm because this is our home."

The Haitian army's rise, fall and latest renaissance has been synonymous to a roller coaster ride that has caused mostly suffering for the country of more than 8 million people.

Aristide disbanded the army in 1995, four years after he was ousted. The 1990-1994 coup regime is blamed for the murders, maimings and torture of thousands of Aristide supporters, and today's former soldiers include convicted murderers.

Human rights groups have begun to denounce new allegations of crimes. In October, the Lawyers' Committee for the Respect of Individual Liberty said it had received reports of former soldiers raping women and young girls in Port-au-Prince.

Little has been done to disarm the ex-soldiers, though U.N. officials say they'll soon launch a major disarmament plan.

"We are prepared to use force against them (ex-soldiers) if they don't disarm," said U.N. envoy Juan Gabriel Valdes.

So far, the ex-military have won in confrontations.

When U.N. troops from Sri Lanka and Haitian police tried to force the ex-soldiers from the former police headquarters that they took by force in December, a mob of supporters began throwing rocks at the peacekeepers, who retreated.

In another standoff that month, another group of ex-soldiers took over Aristide's looted estate on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. They only withdrew from the property after the interim government agreed to give them backpay for the 10 years they were disbanded.

The government plans to pay US\$29 million to about 6,000 former soldiers. There are no official estimates on how many have taken up arms last year, but estimates range from several hundred to 2,000.

Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue insists the conflict will be solved before elections.

"These people don't represent much of a threat," he said in a recent interview. "If they disarm, we'll give them everything they could want. If they don't, the law will go after them."

Latortue -- who last year had scandalized Caribbean leaders by hailing the ex-soldiers as "freedom fighters" -- spoke before four police officers were killed Feb. 6, allegedly by former soldiers.

Police launched a manhunt for Remissainthe Ravix, a former sergeant and one of the rebellion's four leaders, whom he declared his innocence and went into hiding. He remains at large.

Many doubt the peacekeepers and government have the power or will to keep the soldiers in check -- especially during elections scheduled in October and November.

"It will be difficult to have free elections without disarming the former military ... they would try to control the electoral process in the provinces," said Pierre Esperance of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights.

At least one former soldier is aspiring to be president.

Guy Philippe, who came out of exile in the Dominican Republic to help lead last year's uprising, founded the Front for National Reconstruction and has begun campaigning.

Meanwhile, constant friction between the police and former soldiers is hindering U.N. and police efforts to curb escalating violence.

Over 250 people, including 24 police officers, have been killed in clashes around the capital since Aristide supporters intensified demands in September that their return from exile.

For the men at Petit-Goave, strutting around in faded uniforms, the threat of forced disarmament pales compared to their hope of being fully reinstated.

"It's the will of the constitution to have a Haitian army," said former Sgt. Michel Alophene, 43, commander of the Petit-Goave group. "If anybody tries to remove us from this base, we'll know what to do."

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7

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