



Haiti Rapes

by Lyn Duff; February 24, 2005

It was the middle of the night when masked men armed with semi-automatic assault rifles burst into the Cap Haitian home 14-year-old Marjory, the oldest daughter of a local trade unionist. The men were members of the disbanded Haitian military who reformed into the armed gangs who overthrew democratically-elected president Jean Bertrand Aristide one year ago. When they discovered that her father, who the political opposition sought because of his support for the pro-democracy movement, was in hiding, Marjory says, the armed men did the unthinkable.

For three hours different men raped Marjory, her mother and an 11-year-old cousin. It's been six months since she was attacked but Marjory remembers every moment of that night. She describes her attackers in detail, down to the scars on one man's hands and the smell of cigarettes on another's jacket. She avoids eye contact when telling her story, saying that she is embarrassed to tell what happened to her.

"They violated me. [When it was happening] I closed my eyes and waited for them to finish... One of the men told me to open my eyes and look at him while he [raped me]. I didn't want to look at him. They hit me when I cried."

Marjory is part of a growing number of girls and young women who human rights investigators say have been victims of mass rape committed by members of the disbanded military and their compatriots who patrol the countryside and Haiti's cities, hunting down supporters of Haiti's fledgling pro-democracy movement.

Marjory says she was targeted because her father's trade union organized against a wealthy businessman and because her parents are members of Lavalas, the political party led by Jean Bertrand Aristide. Other victims say they were targeted because they or their family members belong to other pro-democracy political organizations or because they work with peasant unions or local women's groups.

"Rape is becoming a common tool of oppression," explains attorney Mario Joseph whose organization Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (BAI) has investigated hundreds of human rights cases in the past year. Joseph, who assisted in the prosecution of the human rights crimes committed during the last coup says that it is discouraging to see the number of convicted human rights violators who are now walking free and serving in the new American-installed interim government.

"Women and young girls are raped because their father or another relative is a member of Lavalas or is targeted [by the political opposition]. They are raped as a form of punishment. The victims do not feel they can go to the police for help with their problems because in many areas the people who victimized them are the ones running the show; they are the ones patrolling the streets as if they are police, committing crimes with impunity under the eyes of the UN. And even in Port-au-Prince, the former military has been hired into the national police force."

According to Charles Leon, chief of the Haitian National Police, 500 former members of the Haitian Army have been integrated into the police force, with plans for an additional 500-1000 former soldiers to be hired within the next year. Haiti's army was disbanded in 1994 by then

President Jean Bertrand Aristide after soldiers committed numerous human rights violations, including mass rapes, during the 1991-94 coup.

United Nations soldiers have also been accused of participating in sexual attacks. Damian Onses-Cardona, spokesperson for the UN mission in Haiti, announced this week that they are "very urgently" investigating a case in which Pakistani soldiers were accused of raping a 23-year-old woman at a banana plantation in the northern town of Gonaives.

"The foreigners grabbed me and pulled my pants down, had me lie on the ground and then raped me," said the woman who asked that her name be withheld. She says two soldiers raped her while a third watched.

More than 7,000 UN troops from countries including China, Brazil and the United States, among others, are stationed in Haiti.

No one knows how many women and girls have been victims of politically motivated rapes since the violence began early last year, say human rights advocates. The two major human rights organizations in Haiti, the CARLI hotline and the National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR) refuse to investigate human rights reports in the poorer neighborhoods, where most of the attacks have occurred, "because those zones are all Aristide-supporter, it's not safe for us to go there," says NCHR's Pierre Esperance.

Both organizations receive extensive funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) including a large chunk of the 1.4 million dollars which was distributed primarily to anti-Aristide organizations in the year prior to the February 2004 coup, according to USAID area director Pamela Callen. In an ironic twist, critics say that the CARLI hotline and NCHR only focus their energies on the few human rights violations they say were committed by members of the pro-democracy movement.

Meanwhile, the handful of attorneys who are investigating Haiti's devolving human rights situation are swamped with reports of atrocities including illegal arrests, torture, murder and rape. "And what we are seeing more often is that after a woman is raped, the attackers force her son or brother to have sexual relations with her as they watch, so that both she and her family are violated again," explains Joseph.

That was the case with Joeseephina Helicaux, 66, whose son is a member of a peasant union that has called for the return of democracy to Haiti. Although they would not consider themselves Aristide supporters, the family believes that the coup and his removal from power by foreign forces was illegal and that Aristide should be allowed to finish his term as president. Josephina's son said as much during a recent demonstration, where he was interviewed on a local radio station.

The next day the Helicaux family was eating dinner when a group of armed men burst into their home. The men were not masked and Joeseephina Helicaux says that two were in police uniforms. "I told the children to be quite and to stop crying. The men searched our room. Afterwards they raped all of us [women], even the girls, and made the men stand and watch," she says. The youngest girl who was attacked is a 9-year-old.

Although the son who had spoken on the radio was not home, another one was, as well as a 28-year-old nephew. The attackers forced Joeseephina Helicaux to have intercourse with her nephew and son, she says. "They laughed [while it was happening]. They told us 'move here, do this,'" she remembers.

After their attackers left, a neighbor contacted American missionary Ann Lautan who came to the home with Alfred Desslieanes, pastor of the New Life Church in Delmas. The pair transported the family to Port-au-Prince's General Hospital where doctor's refused to treat them, reportedly because they feared reprisals from the government.

"The doctors told us outright, they don't treat chimeres and if this family was victimized by the police or by the former military then they are chimeres," says Lautan. Chimere is a derogatory term for the unemployed that has become synonymous with both "gangster" and "Aristide-supporter."

The family was taken to a private clinic where doctors treated them for bleeding, contusions, vaginal tearing, and, in the case of the nephew, several broken bones from a beating he received after he initially refused to follow the men's orders to have sexual relations with his grandmother, says Desslieanes.