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AMONG HAITIANS, POLICE ARE SEEN AS A DEADLY FORCE ; DEATHS FOSTER FEAR OF SUMMARY STREET EXECUTIONS

Reed Lindsay Globe correspondent, 27 February 2005

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - Abdias Jean was eating lunch on the street near his home in the seaside slum of God's Village last month, when he spotted a group of police officers approaching. Jean, a radio news correspondent, ducked into a friend's house.

He was not taking any chances. Ten days earlier, residents say, police had executed a 17-year-old girl and an unarmed man during a raid .

The officers, wearing desert camouflage and black uniforms, had seen Jean enter the house. They ordered him to come out, witnesses said. Then, according to the witnesses, they tied his wrists with his own belt, dragged him less than a block away, and put a bullet through his head.

Why Jean feared he might be a target and what motivated his killing have never been determined. It is not known whether his death might be related to his journalistic work, which included reporting for a news program broadcast on WKAT in Miami, along other radio jobs, or to his work as a local builder.

Police have denied any role in the death. But the case has alarmed human rights advocates who say a growing number of witnesses are reporting summary executions by police in poorer neighborhoods of the Haitian capital.

Nearly one year after US Marines escorted former president Jean- Bertrand Aristide from Haiti, human rights observers say state- sponsored abuses have continued or even escalated under the interim government.

Judy Dacruz, an independent human rights lawyer based in Port-au- Prince, said she has documented 14 summary executions since October. No government

statistics on such crimes could be obtained. Amnesty International has been investigating similar reports but has not yet released its findings.

Most of the executions being investigated have been reported in the slums of Port-au-Prince, where support for Aristide still runs strong and armed groups demanding his return defy the government and clash with police.

"There is complete impunity, but what is more worrying is that there has been a complicity of silence about these killings," Dacruz said. "The authorities don't even acknowledge violations are taking place, and the majority of the press are simply ignoring what is going on."

Dacruz has worked for the Bureau of International Lawyers, which helped Haitian government officials prosecute human rights cases from 1991 to 1994. Now she is carrying on investigations, using her own money.

In the 14 cases since October, Dacruz said, witnesses have identified police officers summarily executing 32 unarmed people. In three other cases, people who were taken into police custody either were found dead or were never seen again.

Government officials and police officers have categorically denied that the police have committed summary executions.

In some cases, they have speculated that former soldiers who support armed gangs loyal to Aristide's Lavalas party might be responsible, while in others they have claimed not to know about the murders.

"I guarantee the police are not involved in these kinds of actions," a police spokeswoman, Gessy Coicou, said in a news conference this month, when asked about Jean's killing. "Personally, I don't know Abdias Jean, I haven't heard of him, and I haven't seen his name in any of the files I have. Many journalists have reported that there are many witnesses. I would advise them to file a complaint."

Jean's mother has filed a formal complaint with the Haitian chief prosecutor's office.