

Divisions derail Haiti one year on
By Becky Branford
BBC News

The gangs which ousted Aristide are now a law unto themselves

A year after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted, the small Caribbean nation of Haiti is in gridlock.

The armed gangs, former soldiers and political groups which briefly converged to see Mr Aristide thrown out of the country on 29 February 2004 claimed to have an agenda for change.

They promised an end to the disputed elections, violent political repression and economic stagnation under Mr Aristide.

But a year later, observers on all sides agree, there has been little improvement.

In fact, "the situation - politically, economically and in terms of security - has deteriorated dramatically," says Colin Granderson, the head of the UN-led civilian mission in Haiti from 1993 to 2000, who is now on the secretariat of Caricom, the organisation of Caribbean states.

Security is at the heart of the problem. Despite a UN peacekeeping force of over 7,000 soldiers and civilian police, the interim government has struggled to assert control.

POVERTY IN NUMBERS

Life expectancy: 53

76% of Haitians live on less than \$2 a day

Half the population lives below the minimum level of dietary energy consumption

5% of population has HIV or Aids

Real GDP per capita declined 50% between 1980 and 2004

Source: International Monetary Fund

Remnants of the military which Mr Aristide disbanded in 1995 roam the countryside and have become the de facto authority in many towns outside the capital Port-au-Prince.

Meanwhile, pro-Aristide gangs run many urban slums.

Added to the mix are the criminal gangs which thrive on Haiti's role as a staging post for cocaine shipments from South America to the US.

"If you go downtown, to the slums, you are exposed to great danger," the head of the Haitian Journalists' Association Guyler Delva told the BBC News website.

"You could be hit by a bullet at any time."

The security problems have deterred international donors who months ago pledged more than \$1.3bn in aid to Haiti from disbursing more than a tiny fraction of the money promised.

Without the funds, observers say, there is no way to finance the social programmes needed to kick-start the economy.

Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, with formal unemployment reported at around 70% and three-quarters of Haitians surviving on less than \$2 a day.

Aristide's ghost

Meanwhile, the legitimacy of the interim government - already in question because of Mr Aristide's unceremonious removal - continues to slide.

The interim government was supposed to act as a non-partisan caretaker which would shepherd the country toward fresh elections.

In reality, it has done nothing to overcome the deep divisions of the country, observers say. Mr Aristide may be far away, but his polarising presence remains as strong as ever.

Aristide's supporters feel victimised and marginalised

"Everyone in the country either loves Aristide or loathes him," Charles Arthur, director of the UK-based Haiti Support Group, told BBC News.

"The country can't move on - the ones who hate Aristide so much seem to have this psychological need to have this hate figure and they can't really let go."

While leaders of Mr Aristide's Lavalas Family party languish in jail without charge, gangs opposed to Mr Aristide "kill, burn houses and commit awful crimes" with apparent impunity, said Mr Devla.

This exacting of retribution on the Lavalas party, which still has a considerable following, has ruled out any process of national reconciliation, he says.

Poll challenge

It is national reconciliation that is desperately needed ahead of elections planned for October and November, many onlookers agree.

"Haitians voted in elections in 1995, 1997, and 2000," Mr Granderson said, "but each election has only aggravated the political situation."

One of the main reasons for that, he says, is that the elections were not seen as transparent and credible.

It is crucial now that a national dialogue begins to establish clear shared goals for national development and to lay common ground rules for the election before campaigning begins, he adds.

If Lavalas party supporters continue to feel excluded from the process, they are likely to stay away from the polls.

"A government selected by a 10% to 20% turnout with some groups excluded would constitute the failure of the transition," the International Crisis Group cautioned in a February report.

But Mr Arthur warns that elections may not solve all Haiti's problems.

"Much more is required from the political process than just having an election, which it seems is all the international community is concerned about," he says.

"The point of an election is to find a party with a programme which can get the country out of this state."

The Lavalas party may have been discredited by its years in power, he says, but there is little evidence that the alternatives - the traditional political parties and the Group of 184, a new coalition of business and civil society groups - can offer such a programme.

"The root cause of Haiti's problems, put simply, is most of the population have nothing, and no potential to improve. Until politicians and the international community want to confront this problem, Haiti's problems will repeat over and over again."