



## Haitian police sow more fear than stability as country gears up for elections

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) - People scatter as black-clad police officers speed through crowded slums, a knee-jerk reaction these days as fearful residents accuse the force of summary killings and strong-arm tactics as the country prepares for elections this year.

The United States and United Nations have tried and failed to build a protective Haitian police force over the years and, despite repeated defeats, offered help again last year after rebels ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide during a three-week revolt.

Mistrusted by residents who have seen political regimes use the police as brutal enforcers, Haiti's police are once again being blamed for operating above the law, allegedly targeting opponents and using trigger-happy tactics.

On Monday, five officers trying to block unarmed protesters escorted by U.N. peacekeepers fired tear gas, then bullets, into a crowd of hundreds.

When they stopped shooting, two men lay dead in the street.

"Police could have hit us by shooting that way," said one angry Brazilian peacekeeper.

This time the victims were Aristide supporters marking the first anniversary of his flight from Haiti with demands that he return from exile in South Africa.

A little more than a year ago, Haitian police were shooting at demonstrators calling for Aristide's downfall. Former soldiers led a three-week revolt to oust Aristide that left scores of policemen dead or mutilated.

Many police officers ran away from their posts. Some fled the country.

U.N. Civilian Police arrived last year to find a depleted, demoralized and outgunned force.

The U.S.-backed interim government purged the force of 200 corrupt or inexperienced officers yet "some HNP officials were implicated in corruption, kidnapping and narcotics trafficking ... (and) committed human rights abuses," according to the U.S. annual human rights report, published Monday.

Military historian Georges Michel said Haiti has a tradition of repressive law enforcers inherited from France colonizers. "Haiti was born in blood" during the only successful slave rebellion that won independence in 1804 "and when we had massacred all the whites, we adopted their plantation mentality," he said.

The interim government has conducted a massive recruiting campaign, but the force is still tiny compared to the security risks facing the impoverished country of some 8 million people.

"They have approximately between 2,000 and 3,000 (officers)," said Dan Moskaluk, a spokesman for the

training and support mission run by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Haiti's police, armed with new M-16 rifles, sawed-off shotguns and pistols, arrive in slums filled with Aristide supporters where their opponents often are better armed, mostly with guns looted during the uprising.

Despite numerous telephone calls about various incidents, and a visit to the police headquarters, the AP has been unable to get police to comment for more than one week.

One officer said they were trying to make a difference, but still are mistrusted.

"We are in a war here, but we don't really know against whom," said a 29-year-old officer at the funeral of four officers allegedly killed by ex-soldiers Feb. 6.

Some 400 civilians and 25 police have died violently since September, according to the National Coalition for Haitian Rights and an AP count. Violence escalated then after police fired on a group of Aristide supporters demanding his return. Two people were killed.

The next day, the bodies of three beheaded officers were found in one of the pro-Aristide slums where police often come under attack.

"There are no police here. If they come in and someone shoots, they retreat," said Gerald Pierre, a 38-year-old man whom journalists have seen with armed gangsters in Cite Soleil slum.

Residents blame police for the killings of at least eight of 19 people shot in Port-au-Prince since Friday.

Lt. Gen. Augusto Heleno Ribeiro, the Brazilian commander of U.N. peacekeepers, confirmed that police killed six people Friday in Bel Air, a hotspot of Aristide militants where Monday's protest took place.

Residents said police fired indiscriminately while peacekeepers stood by. Heleno said no U.N. forces were involved.

He said such police behavior has poisoned the atmosphere for peacekeepers who have worked for two months to improve relations.

"We're being received with a completely different attitude," he told The Associated Press.

On Friday, residents stoned a U.N. vehicle in Bel Air and fired on them, slightly wounding two. On Saturday, a third suffered fragments from a ricocheting bullet.

Aristide's Lavalas Family party attacked the peacekeepers' role in Monday's protest charging "... the police under the instigatory eye of MINUSTAH (the U.N. peacekeeping mission) cowardly assassinated two protesters and wounded many others."

Pierre Esperance said his National Coalition of Haitian Rights "is extremely concerned by the fact that several arrests have been followed by disappearances and/or executions."

Reginald Francois was one of 13 young people killed in what witnesses said was a police raid Oct. 26 in Fort National, neighboring Bel Air.

Luc Francois, the 65-year-old father, said no one has been to question him. Witnesses who spoke to the AP at the time of the attack, also said they had never been contacted.

"We're scared to complain. If you complain, your house gets burned down and you have to flee," Francois told the AP.

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