

Thousands die since US regime change in Haiti

by *Congresswoman Maxine Waters*



Congresswoman Maxine Waters, at mic, long a strong supporter of democracy in Haiti and of its democratically-elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, left, led a delegation to bring him to Jamaica from the Central African Republic, where the U.S. had left him after kidnapping him last Feb. 29.

One year ago today, our government was a party to a coup d'état in Haiti, the Western Hemisphere's poorest country. President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the democratically-elected president of Haiti, was forced to leave Haiti in a regime change supported by the United States. President Aristide left the country on Feb. 29, 2004, on board a U.S. airplane when U.S. Marines and embassy officials came to his home in the wee hours of the morning and told him to leave immediately or he and thousands of other Haitians would be killed.

One year later, the tragic results of regime change in Haiti are clear. Haiti is in total chaos. The interim government, which was put in power by the United States and has received unprecedented support from our government, is a complete failure. Violence is widespread, and security is non-existent. Schools are shut down, hospitals are not operating, and roads and infrastructure are in disrepair. Dead bodies are found lying in the streets.

Heavily-armed gangs roam Haiti freely. Many of these gangs consist of former soldiers from the brutal Haitian army, which was disbanded 10 years ago. Residents of poor neighborhoods and members of Lavalas, President Aristide's political party, are murdered without any legal consequences. Members of Haiti's wealthy elite, including American citizen Andy Apaid, are widely suspected of financing the former soldiers and paying gangs to kill Lavalas supporters. In some neighborhoods, Lavalas supporters have taken up arms and begun to fight back against this oppression. So the violence is escalating in Haiti, and no one is safe.



Police murders are occurring nearly every day in poor neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where residents are protesting daily for the return of President Aristide. This young man was one of two killed Friday in Bel Air.

Photo: K.M. Ives

The interim government has been unable to enforce the rule of law, disarm the gangs, or restore the government's authority in the cities controlled by former soldiers. When Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue set a deadline of Sept. 15 of last year for all groups holding illegal weapons to disarm, the deadline came and went, but nothing happened.

After the interim government failed to disarm the former soldiers, it resorted to bribing them. According to press reports in January, the interim government agreed to provide payments over a three-month period to all of the estimated 6,000 former members of the Haitian army. The payments will average about \$4,800 per person – in a country where most people live on less than a dollar a day.

The cost of these payments was estimated to be \$29 million. The interim government never explained where the funds for these payments would be obtained, but Interim Prime Minister Latortue has already distributed checks to dozens of armed individuals who claim to be former soldiers and who still refuse to turn in their weapons. Is this the conduct of a government that wants to disarm the thugs, or a government that supports them?

Human rights violations are commonplace throughout Haiti. Amnesty International has expressed serious concerns about arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment in detention centers and summary executions attributed to members of the Haitian National Police. Several members of President Aristide's government and prominent supporters of Lavalas have been detained illegally, including former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, former Interior Minister Joceleme Privert and Haitian singer Anne Auguste.

As of Feb. 18, there were over 700 political prisoners in Haiti's jails. Most of these prisoners have been held illegally for months without formal charges.

The incompetence of the interim government has manifested itself in other ways as well. Haiti's government was the only government in the path of Hurricane Jeanne that did not warn or evacuate its citizens when the storm came racing through the Caribbean last September. Jeanne pummeled the United States, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Barbados as a full-blown hurricane, and killed 34 people in all of those countries combined. She was only a tropical storm when she hit Haiti, but she killed over 3,000 Haitians and left thousands more hungry and homeless, because the interim government was unprepared to protect the Haitian people.

The Provisional Electoral Council, which is responsible for organizing elections, has been discredited by corruption. Roselor Julien, the former president of the council, resigned last November, warning that other panel members were trying to rig the ballot and the council was not capable of ensuring the elections would be free and fair. The council also does not include any representatives of Lavalas, which continues to enjoy widespread support among the Haitian people despite the imprisonment of its leaders.

It is abundantly clear that the council is incapable of organizing free and fair elections. If the current council does manage to organize elections, only the winners will accept the result.

The people of Haiti have suffered tremendously over the past year. They deserve better. They deserve to live in peace and security. They deserve to be warned when hurricanes are headed for their homes. They deserve to know that they can walk to work or buy groceries without having gangs kill them for the food they carry. And they deserve free, fair and democratic elections in which all political parties can participate.

When President Aristide was forced to leave Haiti a year ago, he was told that if he refused to leave, thousands of Haitians would die. Yet, in the 12 months that followed his departure, thousands of Haitians have died, and as long as the interim government continues to fail, there will be no end to the suffering and violence facing the Haitian people.

It is time for the United States government to accept the fact that regime change has failed in Haiti. The United States must ensure that Haiti disarms the thugs, immediately frees political prisoners, and organizes free and fair elections in order to restore security and democracy to the Haitian people. The United States must also provide the necessary assistance to enable Haiti to reopen

schools and hospitals and rebuild Haiti's infrastructure.

It is time for the United States to clean up its mess.

Contact Rep. Waters at 2344 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington DC
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Rep. Waters tells Secretary Rice to stop Haiti police killings

Washington, D.C. – Rep. Maxine Waters sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Monday, expressing shock and outrage at reports that police officers opened fire on unarmed demonstrators in Haiti earlier today and urging her to investigate these reports and ensure that the interim government of Haiti respects the rights of peaceful protesters and American observers. Copies of the letter were sent to President Bush and Ambassador James Foley, the U.S. Ambassador to Haiti. The text of the letter follows:

"I am writing to express my shock and outrage about reports I have received that police officers opened fire on unarmed demonstrators in Haiti earlier today.

"According to these reports, a large nonviolent March for Democracy began in the center of Bel-Air around noon today. Thousands of people participated, marching and chanting to the beat of drums. MINUSTAH, United Nations security forces and local and international media were present. About half an hour after the protest began, there were loud noises, and people began screaming and running for cover. Some people were seen carrying injured persons on their backs, and some witnesses reported seeing police in black uniforms, helmets and ski masks shooting into the crowds. According to preliminary reports, several people were shot, others were beaten, and at least one person was killed. Today's violence follows a previous report I received that police shot more than fifteen people in cold blood in Bel-Air on Friday.

"As you know, I wrote to you last week to warn you of the potential for acts of violence targeting peaceful protesters and American observers in Haiti during the final days of February. Today, I urge you to investigate these incidents fully and demand that the interim government of Haiti prosecute those found responsible for any human rights violations that may have occurred. I also plead with you to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that the interim government respects the rights of Lavalas supporters and other peaceful protesters and American observers.

"Please contact me as soon as possible to discuss the escalation in violence that has occurred in Haiti over the past four days and explain the steps that you plan to take to ensure the restoration of peace, security and human rights to the people of Haiti. I await your response."