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U.N. ambassador denounces police brutality in Haiti

Joe Mozingo. Mar 2, 2005

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- Two days after Haitian police opened fire on a crowd of peaceful protesters and killed two, the head of the U.N. mission here said police brutality is undercutting progress and such action will no longer be tolerated.

"We cannot tolerate executions," U.N. Ambassador Juan Gabriel Valdes said in an interview with The Miami Herald on Wednesday. "We can't tolerate shooting out of control. We will not permit human rights abuses."

He said U.N. peacekeepers will intervene -- and use force if necessary -- if Haitian police attack unarmed civilians again.

The peacekeepers began arriving in Haiti in June to support the small and outgunned police force in restoring law and order after the ouster of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

But shootouts between Haitian police and residents of poor neighborhoods still loyal to Aristide are becoming a daily occurrence. And allegations are mounting that officers are killing unarmed people without provocation.

Valdes concedes that the international troops have witnessed suspicious police shootings before Monday's attack. "There was an incident last week in which four people were killed," he said.

The stakes could not be higher. Such attacks are fueling unrest in the vast slums around the capital city of Port-au-Prince and threaten to derail the legitimacy -- or

even feasibility -- of elections now set for October to replace the interim government.

Monday's shooting brought the issue to a head.

About 2,000 Aristide supporters marched through the slum of Bel Air to mark the anniversary of his ouster. Peacekeepers had the situation under control and told police commanders not to send any patrols in, knowing the hostility they create.

According to a U.N. report on the incident, mid-level police officials decided to confront the protesters, and three trucks carrying 15-20 masked officers pulled in front of the group.

"At that moment, the demonstration was absolutely pacific," according to a U.N. official reading from the report. "No one was armed in any evident way."

The crowd cursed the police, who then fired three tear gas grenades and began shooting wildly into the crowd, the U.N. official said. Police then left the scene.

Valdes and other U.N. officials were furious. "We believe that all we have done in Bel Air is seriously threatened by this incident," Valdes said.

Since December, Brazilian soldiers have been conducting humanitarian missions in Bel Air -- one of the most volatile slums -- cleaning streets, handing out food, providing medical services. Slowly, they were gaining trust from residents tired of armed gangs controlling the streets.

But the relative calm has unraveled in recent weeks. Four Brazilian peacekeepers were shot in Bel Air on Friday and Saturday, and the hostility in the area was palpable on Monday even before the shooting.

On Tuesday, Valdes spoke at length with Haitian Prime Minister Gerard Latortue and Police Chief Leon Charles, and received promises that such an attack will not happen again.

The U.N. mandate for the peacekeepers -- which requires them to support the police no matter the circumstances -- is being reevaluated at the highest levels, Valdes said.

"We are going to examine all of the methods of working with police here," he said.

One key aspect will be recruiting. When anti-Aristide rebels swept through the country last year and ousted the president, police officers largely fled their posts. Stations were looted, guns were stolen.

The U.S.-backed interim government has been trying to rebuild the force, but corruption is an overwhelming temptation amid Haiti's deep-seated poverty. Officers have been implicated in drug trafficking, kidnappings, murders and one major prison break.

Valdes said the government has been quick to fire corrupt officers. But the need to clean up a force of about 5,000 officers is countered by the need to build it up at a rapid pace. In a country of 7.6 million people, the force needs to have about 33,000 to effectively patrol the rugged terrain.

U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan raised the issue of police abuses in his February report on the Haiti mission, made public Wednesday.

"I remain concerned about the human rights situation, including allegations of human rights abuses attributed to Haitian police officers," Annan wrote.

Valdes said this issue is the most important challenge facing the peacekeeping force today. "What is being played out in this moment of Haitian history is crucial."

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