

**Four U.S. senators call for Haiti's jailed former premier to either be charged or released**

By STEVENSON JACOBS

Associated Press Writer

536 words

10 March 2005

12:33 am

Associated Press Newswires

English

(c) 2005. The Associated Press. All Rights Reserved.

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) - Four U.S. senators urged Haiti's interim government Wednesday to either charge or release a former prime minister who has been on a hunger strike for almost three weeks to protest his incarceration.

The senators, all Democrats, also expressed concern about the health of former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, who is among dozens of former officials jailed without charge since ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide fled Haiti amid a rebel uprising last year.

Neptune denies accusations of orchestrating killings of Aristide opponents in the western town of St. Marc during the rebellion.

"If no charges have been brought against Mr. Neptune, we demand that he be immediately released," said Connecticut Sen. Christopher Dodd in a letter to interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue. "No prisoner should be submitted to prolonged detention unless they are formally charged ... and prompt steps are taken to set a date for their trial."

Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa and Vermont Senators James Jeffords and Patrick Leahy also signed the letter, a copy of which was released by Dodd's office.

The senators also called reports that Neptune was in poor health "troubling." They urged the government to hold his trial in the capital of Port-au-Prince instead of St. Marc so U.N. peacekeepers can guarantee his safety.

Latortue's office did not immediately return calls seeking comment. Interim Justice Minister Bernard Gousse has ruled out requesting a change of venue without evidence that Neptune's life is in danger.

The letter came two days after U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters, a Democrat from California, visited Neptune and called him and former Interior Minister Jocelerme Privert "political prisoners."

The interim government also accuses Privert of orchestrating the St. Marc killings. He denies the accusations and also has not been charged.

Privert and Neptune have both refused meals since a Feb. 19 attack on the National Penitentiary that freed almost 500 inmates. The interim government has said Privert and Neptune did not try to escape. Guards turned them over to U.N. custody during the attack, but both men asked to be returned to prison.

Waters said Neptune was thin and warned he could die from the fast. U.N. envoy Juan Gabriel Valdes, however, visited Neptune twice last week and reported that he appeared weak but not seriously ill, a Western diplomat said on condition of anonymity.

Separately, the U.N. peacekeeping mission denied the interim government's claims that its soldiers prevented

police from monitoring a pro-Aristide protest on Friday.

Gousse has accused U.N. troops of violating their mandate by blocking police from monitoring the march.

Valdes rejected the claim, telling reporters Tuesday night that a "coordination misunderstanding" between police and the 7,400-member U.N. force was to blame for the police's absence. He did not elaborate.

The protest came four days after witnesses accused police of opening fire on marchers marking the one-year anniversary of Aristide's ouster. Two men lay dead after the shootings, but police insisted they only fired tear gas.

7

Document APRS000020050310e13a00131

© 2005 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva). All rights reserved.