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Haiti still struggling a year after Boca man assumes control as interim leader

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When Boca Raton retiree Gerard Latortue was appointed interim prime minister of Haiti, he personified the dreams of Haitians living abroad who always have wanted to rebuild their country.

A year later, as some expatriates reflect on a year in which Haiti has seen continued violence, natural disasters and charges of human rights violations, they are less optimistic.

Haiti remains a country in crisis. Poverty is endemic. Environmental threats persist. The economy is stagnant.

Violence is rampant with more than 400 people slain since September because of political instability. United Nations forces are unable to maintain peace.

"The only hope I have now for the country is that somebody will take it over and run it for us," said Kathy Holley, a Pembroke Pines resident who participated last year in South Florida demonstrations against ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. "We have to be the most unlucky country in the world. No matter what we do, we can't get the country together."

When 500 prisoners escaped from the National Penitentiary on Feb. 19, many Haitians called for Latortue's resignation. Some were the same people who called for the removal of Aristide a year ago.

Gerard Ferere, a Latortue supporter and fellow Boca Raton retiree, said Haitian politicians have feared that the diaspora would return to the country and seize power ever since the 1986 departure of former dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier.

"The prime minister was dreaming when he thought they were going to receive him well, and so was I," he said. "If my name was Gerard Latortue, it would have been a long time ago that I would've been in my swimming pool in Boca Raton. I would tell them, 'Hasta la vista, baby.'"

Haitians living abroad represent Haiti's middle class. They keep the country afloat with about \$1 billion in annual remittances. Many Haitian nationals and U.S. politicians think the immigrant population with its economic, educational and political resources is the answer to the country's woes. At more than 260,000, South Florida's Haitian community is the largest in the nation.

As the country prepares for fall elections, many Haitian Americans, with the help of U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Fla., are pushing for the Haitian government to allow its nationals abroad to vote. Some nationals in South Florida plan to run for president.

Samir Mourra, 49, a Miami businessman running under the Mobilization for the Progress of Haiti party, wants to revive the country, which he says was destroyed under Aristide. A former brother-in-law of "Baby Doc," he says he had no connection to the dictator's regime.

"I decided to get involved in this battle because I have strong support," he said. "Where there's a will, there's a way."

Another presidential candidate is Dr. Gregoire Eugene Jr., 51, a Fort Lauderdale physician. He is running under the Social Christian Party of Haiti, which was founded by his late father in 1979 to oppose the Duvalier government. His father fled the country in 1980, and died in exile in Miami 15 years later.

"I think I can do better than what I see in the political field now," Eugene said. "I want to take my chances and struggle for what I believe."

Aristide, exiled in South Africa, left the country for the Central African Republic on Feb. 29, 2004, at the height of an armed rebellion. He traveled on a U.S. plane and claimed he was kidnapped by the U.S. government. In a recent interview with The Washington Times, he said he stills considers himself the country's democratically elected president.

The U.S. government has denied Aristide's kidnapping charges and continues to back Latortue, who was named interim prime minister March 9.

U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Cal., and others continue to call for an investigation into Aristide's departure. On Monday, Waters led a delegation to Port-au-Prince to visit Aristide's former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, who is in prison. Neptune was arrested by the Haitian government in June for his alleged involvement in a February 2004 massacre that left more than 50 people dead in the city of St. Marc.

Neptune, who denies the charges, has been on a hunger strike at the National Penitentiary since Feb. 26. Waters said she encouraged Neptune to see a physician and seek temporary asylum in the United States, but he refused.

"Prime Minister Neptune was weak and could only speak in a whispering voice," she said in a news release. "He insisted that he had been jailed without justification and that he had committed no crime ... He believes he has been targeted to be killed."

Ira Kurzban, a Miami attorney who represents Aristide, traveled with Waters to the country, but was denied entry by the government, he and Waters said.

"It was clear that the reason they were not letting me in is because I'm a critic of the government," Kurzban said Tuesday. "It confirms the illegitimate and autocratic nature of this so-called government of Haiti."

Haitian government officials could not be reached for comment. But Latortue supporters say the interim prime minister is doing his best under daunting circumstances. They dismissed calls for his resignation.

"If you remove the prime minister it will be very hard to have a new government," said Olicier Pieriche, a former consul general to Miami

appointed by Latortue.

Ferere said promises of foreign aid never materialized, so Latortue has not been able "to demonstrate his ability to rebuild the country."

But Lucy Orlando, a Haitian American activist living in Weston, said she borrowed money against her house last year to finance bus trips to New York and Washington, D.C., for demonstrations calling for the ouster of Aristide. She thought the country would have made more progress by now.

"I feel very depressed and very disgusted about what's going on in Haiti right now," she said. "I don't call it freedom or liberation. It's condemnation because Haiti is worse than before."

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