

**Haiti police absorbs army and stokes rights fears.**

By Joseph Guyler Delva

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, March 16 (Reuters) - Former rebel soldiers dominate the high command of Haiti's police force and hundreds more are joining its lower ranks, stoking fears of a surge in rights violations in the troubled Caribbean country.

Several hundred members of the disbanded Haitian army, many of whom took up arms in February 2004 against then-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, have joined the Haitian National Police

The authorities in the poorest nation in the Americas say the recruits are screened to ensure none have histories of drug trafficking, corruption or human rights violations that marked the army during military rule before Aristide came to power.

But the Lawyers' Committee for Individual Rights, known as CARLI and one of the main human rights groups in Haiti, said some are already being blamed for abuses against supporters of the exiled Aristide.

"Many of the killings and summary executions in pro-Aristide slums are believed to have been carried out by ex-soldiers who became police," CARLI's head, Renan Hedouville, told Reuters. "They (the victims) are sometimes killed with their hands tied up or with their hands behind their head."

Aristide, a former Roman Catholic priest who was a hero to Haiti's poor masses when he first won the presidency in 1990, left Haiti on Feb. 29, 2004, in the face of a monthlong revolt by armed gangs and former soldiers and under U.S. and French pressure to quit. He is living in South Africa.

Haiti has struggled to establish a stable democracy after decades of dictatorship. Its dreaded, coup-prone army killed thousands during the Duvalier family dictatorship, which ended in the mid-1980s, and when it first ousted Aristide in 1991.

Aristide disbanded the army in 1995 and, with United Nations help, established a civilian police force.

But the force, weakened by corruption and political interference in the latter years of Aristide's rule, was easily overrun by the rebels last year. Some former soldiers have demanded that the interim government installed after Aristide's departure reinstate the army.

In addition to the rank and file, the police high command is now dominated by ex-military, including Police Chief Leon Charles and Inspector General in Chief Frantz Jean-Francois.

Only one of the top 12 police commanders in the Port-au-Prince area does not have a military background, and most regional police chiefs are also ex-soldiers.

Jean-Francois declined to comment.

A "DANGEROUS" SITUATION

The Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organizations, a coalition of groups, said the situation was "dangerous."

"Police officers and soldiers receive quite different training. It's not likely that ex-soldiers who become police will get rid of their military reflexes," Rony Maxime, the leader of the coalition, said.

Damian Onses-Cardona, a spokesman for a U.N. force trying to keep the peace between supporters and foes of Aristide, said ex-soldiers joining the police received the same training as other graduates from the police academy.

U.N. civilian police monitors also teach human rights to applicants at the academy, he said.

"The (U.N.) mission would be absolutely against any ex-military integrating into the police with a criminal record," Onses-Cardona said, calling on critics to present documented cases of abuse to the mission's human rights unit.

Ultimately, a law-abiding police force is crucial to establishing a healthy democracy in Haiti, analysts say.

"If the police become the de facto army, then nothing in fact has changed," said Robert Fatton, chair of the Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics at University of Virginia.

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