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### Haiti

**By Charles Arthur**

In early 2004, the political conflict between the Lavalas Family party government and its opponents came to a head when an armed insurgency broke out, eventually forcing President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to leave the country on 29 February. As in 2003, during the first two months of the year the media was heavily involved in the political conflict - a large section of the media taking an open position in favour of the opposition movement, while a smaller section took a pro-government line. As a consequence, many journalists were victims of threats and physical attacks.

Unfortunately, the collapse of the Aristide government, the appointment of a new interim administration, and the arrival of international military forces mandated to re-establish a stable and secure environment, did not mean an end to abuses of media freedom. Amnesty International, in its June report on human rights in Haiti, reported that whereas previously it was journalists perceived to be working for anti-Aristide media whose rights were abused, since March "threats and intimidation have been directed primarily against journalists who worked in pro-Aristide private media or in government media during the Aristide regime." In July, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) detailed the great dangers faced by Haitian journalists, months after the new government was installed. The CPJ report stated, "The threats are, in part, a legacy of Haiti's polarised media environment - one in which news outlets themselves became closely tied to political positions at either extreme. While the targets of attacks may have changed, analysts say, Haitian journalists will never be able to pursue their work freely until all of them can work without the threat of violence."

In the early part of the year, with the Lavalas Family party government facing mass demonstrations in the capital, and threatened by the emergence of an armed opposition in the border region and in the important central city of Gonaïves, relations with the media worsened considerably. The openly anti-government position taken by the National Association of Haitian Media (Association Nationale des Médias Haïtiens, ANMH) - a grouping of media owners including those of most of the established radio stations - did much to aggravate the situation,

and made journalists vulnerable to threats and attacks from government supporters. As the situation became more volatile, opposition partisans were also involved in a number of incidents of abuse of journalists' rights.

The following list, detailed in a 23 January press release from the Groupe de Réflexion et d'Action pour la Liberté de la Presse (Group for Reflection and Action for Press Freedom), gives a flavour of the situation across the country as rival groups struggled for control of the airwaves:

In Petit-Goâve, the pro-government gang that had admitted responsibility for the 2001 murder of the journalist Brignol Lindor, but not been brought to justice, continued to circulate and threaten the lives of journalists in the town; in Saint Marc, over the course of just a few weeks, five radio stations - pro- and anti-government - were attacked or set ablaze; elsewhere in the central Artibonite department, the director of Radio Atlantique was forced into hiding because of death threats; and in Les Cayes, Radio Sud FM was forced off the air by death threats to its director, Roody Balan.

The seriousness of the situation was highlighted on 21 February, when in the second city of Cap-Haïtien, Pierre Eli Sem, owner and manager of Radio Hispanola in the nearby village of Trou du Nord and correspondent for Radio Métropole in the northeast, was shot several times by pro-government gunmen. Elie Sem said he had begun receiving threats some days earlier when his station had started broadcasting news from the anti-government Radio Métropole. The following day, when the city fell to anti-government rebels, groups of demonstrators, protected by the rebels, ransacked and set fire to Radio Africa and Radio Télé Kombit (RTK), both belonging to leading Lavalas Family members.

In the capital, Port-au-Prince, where scores of local and foreign journalists covered the succession of demonstrations and the street clashes between demonstrators and police, there were a vast number of violent incidents. For example, on 16 February, Assad Volcy, a journalist at Radio Solidarité, and Alphonse Dieuliphène, a cameraman for Télé-Éclair, were beaten up and had their equipment damaged by opposition demonstrators; on 20 February, Claude Bellevue of Radio Ibo was hit in the back by shell fragments fired from a 12 calibre gun fired by government supporters, and, during the same demonstration, a Spanish cameraman suffered an ear injury as a result of a machete blow, and an Agence France-Presse photographer was also injured.

Around the same time, on the outskirts of the capital, Roberto Andrade of the Mexican television channel, Televisa, and another reporter working for the Mexican network, TV Azteca, had to flee when they were stoned by government supporters, who then chased and caught them, and forced them to hand over their film.

In the last days of February, as rumours of an impending rebel advance on the capital gathered strength, the situation seriously deteriorated. On 25 February, Radio Solidarité received death and arson threats, and two days later, on the night of 27 February, government supporters machine-gunned and partially burnt the offices of Radio Vision 2000. On 29 February, amid scenes of rioting and looting in many parts of the city, Radio Ibo was attacked and forced to suspend news broadcasts, and armed men ransacked the offices of Télé Haïti, the one television channel independent of the government. On 1 March, the day after President Aristide's departure, the offices of Radio and Télé Timoun, both owned by Aristide's Foundation for Democracy, were ransacked, and according to Amnesty International, following the attack, some of their journalists received threatening phone calls. Radio Solidarité stopped broadcasting news on 1 March after receiving threatening telephone calls, and did not resume broadcasts until 6 April.

One of two murders of media workers in Haiti during the year was the fatal shooting of Ricardo Ortega, the 37-year old correspondent for the Spanish television station, Antena 3. Ortega was shot twice in the chest on 7 March while covering a demonstration celebrating the end of the Aristide regime. He died from his wounds later the same day. International press reports concluded that Ortega, and Michael Laughlin, a photographer with the Florida-based daily Sun Sentinel, who was also shot and wounded during the disturbances, were victims of pro-Aristide gunmen blamed for shooting at the crowd, killing a total of seven people and wounding dozens more. However, after conducting its own investigation and interviewing witnesses in Haiti, Antena 3 aired a special report on 27 October that concluded that Ortega was shot an hour or so after the initial shooting, and that the fatal bullet could have come from the U.S. military, which had deployed thousands of marines to Haiti on the day of Aristide's departure. Adding weight to this controversial conclusion was the irregular treatment of Jean-Michel Gaspard, a Haitian police inspector arrested on 28 March on suspicion of being involved in the attack, who was later released, without being investigated, by U.S. soldiers who at that time controlled the national penitentiary.

Despite the change in government, journalists continued to suffer intimidation and threats, particularly in areas outside the capital where illegal armed groups and former members of the disbanded Haitian army became the de facto security forces. A Human Rights Watch report dated 22 March cited interviews with a number of radio journalists in Cap-Haïtien, including journalists with state-owned Radio Nationale, who had gone into hiding. These journalists described the lack of security and the resultant fears for their safety. They gave the names of another dozen journalists also said to be in hiding. Human Rights Watch also reported that, as of 19 March, Augustin Joseph, an employee of the pro-Lavalas Family radio station, Radio Voix Paysanne Milot, was one of 16 prisoners held by the armed irregular forces in Cap-Haïtien.

On 30 March, Lyonel Lazarre, a correspondent for Radio Solidarité and Agence Haïtienne de Presse in the southern city of Jacmel, was abducted by a group of ex-soldiers after he reported information relating to abuses they were allegedly involved in. The kidnappers beat him and only released him the next day after forcing him to indicate the location of the home of a colleague working for Radio Ginen, whom they accused of being close to the deposed President Aristide.

On 16 April, a group of ex-soldiers seized Jeanty André Omilert, the local Radio Solidarité correspondent in the central town of Mirebalais. Omilert was detained in front of the premises of Radio Excelsior, the local station where he hosts a discussion programme, and then incarcerated for three days in the town police station. Guylér Delva, head of the Association des Journalistes haïtiens (Haitian Journalists' Association - AJH) said the kidnapping took place because Omilert had broadcast news deemed contrary to the interests of the armed irregular forces in control of the Central Plateau region since mid-February. A month later, the ex-soldiers abducted and, for two days, detained Charles Prosper, the Mirebalais correspondent for Radio Tropic FM. The group said they objected to Prosper's reports about the volatile political situation, and accused him of having ties to the Lavalas Family party.

At the end of June, the Radio Métropole commentator and journalist, Nancy Roc, was shot at as she drove to Jacmel. Her car windscreen was shattered, but she was unhurt. There is speculation that the attack was a reprisal following her recently broadcast, negative comments about Guy Philippe, a leader of the anti-Aristide insurgents. There was further concern for Roc's safety in early November when a leader of the armed group controlling much of the central city of Gonaïves publicly linked her to an alleged plot leading to the 2003 murder of one its leaders.

At the end of July, Jacques Mathelier, a former Aristide-appointed departmental delegate, reported that Radio Paradis, his station in the southwestern town of Tiburon, had been machine-gunned, and that his house in the city of Les Cayes had been ransacked. On 30 August, ex-soldiers in Jacmel took over the offices of the Aristide Foundation's Radio Timoun, and transformed it into what they described as the local headquarters of the re-constituted army.

In the context of these post-Aristide incidents, Amnesty International concluded that in the provinces and the countryside, many journalists have "simply stopped reporting about the political situation for fear of reprisals". How far the government of interim Prime Minister, Gérard Latortue, can be held responsible for this situation is a matter for debate. On the one hand, officials have not issued any overt threats to media outfits, nor have they allowed police to harass journalists. On the other hand, government leaders have failed to speak out against abuses and when questioned about the issue have flatly denied that any problems exist. At the same time some

members of the government enjoyed close relations with the armed former rebels and ex-soldiers who helped overthrow the Aristide regime. Latortue clearly stated his debt to the armed groups in Gonaïves whose uprising helped oust his predecessor when, on a visit to the city in March, he called them "freedom fighters".

Furthermore, by taking steps to suppress pro-Lavalas Family party media, the Latortue government effectively encouraged a general climate of lack of respect for freedom of speech. On 18 May, the interim government closed the offices of Radio and Télé Ti Moun because of alleged financial irregularities that are still being investigated, and on 28 May, police arrested Aryns Laguerre, a Télé Ti Moun cameraman, on what the AJH called dubious grounds.

The 2 October arrest of three leading Lavalas Family party officials at the studios of Radio Caraïbes, in the capital, was also a cause for concern. Two senators, Yvon Feuillé and Gerard Gilles, and a former parliamentary deputy, Rudy Hérivaux, had just finished participating in a live discussion programme with other politicians, when police surrounded the station. Radio Caraïbes station manager, Patrick Moussignac, refused to allow the police entry, citing the Haitian Constitution's protection of free speech, but after a daylong standoff the three were finally apprehended on suspicion of involvement in anti-government violence. The director of Radio Kiskeya, Liliane Pierre-Paul, criticised the arrest of participants in a political discussion programme at a radio station, saying it was "a very bad precedent ... a terrible day for the media." Radio Caraïbes ceased broadcasting for a day as a mark of protest against the action. (All three were eventually released from police custody without having being charged).

There was disappointment, too, with the interim government's failure to make any progress with the judicial investigations into the earlier murders of journalists, Brignol Lindor and Jean Dominique. Michele Montas, the widow of Jean Dominique - shot dead in April 2000 - is sceptical that justice will ever be done. In December, she told the Los Angeles Times, "People are dragging their feet as much now as before. With so much at stake for the reputation of Haiti, you have to ask yourself, why?"

Evidence that political divisions are still keenly felt by Haitian journalists themselves surfaced in June at the annual AJH awards ceremony. Although efforts were made to assemble a panel representing a variety of political viewpoints, its decision to grant one of the awards to Jeanty André Omilert, the Radio Solidarité correspondent who had earlier been detained by ex-soldiers, caused great controversy. Some AJH members were outraged that a station regarded by many as pro-Aristide had been selected. Such was the strength of feeling that AJH president, Guyler Delva, who refused to bow to pressure to reverse the decision, received death threats. Eventually

Omlert rejected the award, saying that to accept it was too divisive. Delva lamented, "Reporters on both sides think that some colleagues should not have a voice or an opportunity to speak out because of their political background. This division has created additional risks for Haitian journalists and will be very difficult to overcome in the near future."

The nation mourned the 13 September murder of a Baptist minister who was one of the country's most popular radio personalities. The Rev. Jean Moles Lovinsky Berthomieux, better known to listeners as "Pastor Moles", was shot several times as he was leaving his Port-au-Prince home for Radio Caraïbes FM, where his religious programme, "The Morning Manna", was a top-rated show. Police later announced the arrest of three people suspected of killing him while attempting a robbery.