



## **Armed ex-soldiers who killed peacekeeper believed hiding in Haiti's lawless center or in Dominican Republic**

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760 words

22 March 2005

05:16 pm

Associated Press Newswires

English

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) - U.N. troops and Haitian police will hunt down a band of **armed ex-soldiers who killed** a peacekeeper and are believed to be hiding in the lawless Central Plateau region or who may have fled to the neighboring Dominican Republic, an official said Tuesday.

Col. El Ouafi Boulbars, a U.N. military spokesman, said troops have not yet begun the pursuit because they are still gathering intelligence on the ex-soldiers' whereabouts.

The former soldiers who helped oust former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide last year are among several armed groups that still hold sway in Haiti's countryside, raising fears that they could disrupt fall elections.

Meanwhile, the head of the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Haiti, Juan Gabriel Valdes, said Tuesday the United Nations is willing to disarm Haitian gangs and help them return to civilian life, but is prepared to go after them "with firmness" if they refuse.

His comments came two days after ex-soldiers opened fire on Nepalese peacekeepers manning a checkpoint in Haiti's volatile Central Plateau, killing one. The fighters managed to escape by using women and children as human shields, the U.N. Security Council said, calling the attacks "cowardly."

Boulbars said U.N. officials have information that the fighters may be hiding around the central town of Hinche "or maybe moved east to cross the border into the Dominican Republic."

"But we are hunting them. There is no operation yet but when we have all the information we will track them down," he said. "It is our duty to capture them and hand them over to Haitian police."

A Dominican army spokesman said he has no information on ex-soldiers trying to cross the border. "But if they do attempt, we'll be ready," said Army Col. Francisco Fernandez.

Fernandez said about 1,000 Dominican troops are stationed along the 225-mile (360-kilometer) border, which is barren and sparsely populated in most areas.

Earlier Sunday, Sri Lankan troops backed by Haitian police fought a fierce gunbattle with a different group of ex-soldiers occupying a police station in Petit-Goave, about 45 miles (72 kilometers) west of Port-au-Prince. One Sri Lankan died and three others were wounded. Two fighters were killed and 12 injured.

U.N. forces detained 35 ex-soldiers following the gunbattle that killed the Sri Lankan.

The deaths were the first fatalities among the 7,400-strong U.N. force, which only reached full strength in December and has been criticized for slowness to disarm militants during its 10-month-old mission. Ex-soldiers and street gangs are blamed for more than 400 killings since September.

A report by Harvard University said peacekeepers have done little to establish security in Haiti and curb human rights violations.

Speaking at the United Nations on Tuesday, Valdes said the U.N. mission was offering armed gangs in shantytowns the chance to turn over their weapons and return to civilian life, but was not imposing a deadline.

"If these offers are not received, if it is not possible to continue to follow a peaceful rendering of these weapons and the disarmament of these groups, we will follow the same line of firmness that we have followed in the last week vis a vis the former military," Valdes said.

A day after praising peacekeeping efforts in Haiti, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld raised doubts Tuesday about the prospects for elections here this fall, citing the U.S. government's experience with ensuring the safety of voters in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"It takes a lot of efforts and planning from a security standpoint," Rumsfeld said en route to Brazil as part of a four-day swing through Latin America. "You simply have to be ahead of it or it can get bad fast."

Responding to the attack on the Nepalese, about 300 U.N. troops on Monday raided the central town of Terre-Rouge and fought a 10-minute gunbattle with ex-soldiers occupying another police station. Brazilian and Nepalese troops took the town without any casualties among either peacekeepers or ex-soldiers, who fled into surrounding hills.

The ex-soldiers, many well into their 50s with fading uniforms and aging rifles, have bucked calls by the interim government and the U.N. force to disarm. Aristide disbanded the army in 1995, four years after he was ousted.

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