

**Violence could delay Haiti elections.**

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, April 11 (Reuters) - Violence in Haiti that has killed hundreds since September could delay a presidential election scheduled for November, the country's electoral agency said on Monday.

Rosemond Pradel, secretary general of the council organizing elections to replace ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, said preparations were already behind schedule because of armed gangs, intimidation by former soldiers and general lawlessness.

"If urgent steps are not taken to improve the security situation, it will have serious and negative consequences on the election schedule," Pradel told Reuters.

Aristide, a former priest who championed Haiti's poor but faced accusations in recent years of corruption and despotism, fled Haiti on Feb. 29, 2004, after a month-long revolt by gangs and former soldiers. He is now in exile in South Africa.

An interim government led by Prime Minister Gerard Latortue and backed by the United States and France was appointed to fill the vacuum, but the impoverished Caribbean country has slid deeper into instability.

Pro-and anti-Aristide gangs fight frequent gunbattles, the police are accused of human rights abuses, high-profile Aristide allies have been jailed for months without charge and a 7,000-strong Brazilian-led U.N. peacekeeping force has been unable to restore order.

At least 650 people have died since September, according to various human rights organizations.

U.N. Security Council ambassadors are making a special trip to Haiti this week to review the U.N. mission in Port-au-Prince.

Latortue, who was in Miami on Monday, told reporters: "It's just a visit. They are visiting Haiti because they have a long good program in Port-au-Prince. It is an information meeting and nothing else."

Latortue, who has frequently criticized the U.N. mission for not cracking down on armed gangs, praised the peacekeepers "for doing a better job now."

SECURITY OPERATION

Haitian and U.N. police this weekend killed a former military commander, Remissainthe Ravix, who helped oust Aristide but turned his guns on the interim government as his demands for re-establishment of the disbanded army went unmet.

They also killed an allied gang leader, Jean Anthony Rene.

Michel Brunache, chief of staff for interim President Alexandre Boniface, said authorities had given themselves

until the end of April to create a secure climate for fair elections, and the weekend operation marked the start of the campaign.

"We don't want any place in the country to be controlled by gang leaders where candidates cannot campaign," Brunache said.

Legislative and presidential elections are scheduled for Nov. 13, while local government elections are set for Oct. 9.

There are over 100 registered parties but questions remain over whether Haiti's largest political force, Aristide's Lavalas Family party, will campaign or even be allowed to.

Nothing short of a miracle would permit free and fair elections by year's end, said a spokesman for the Group of 184, a coalition of businessmen, church groups and civic leaders which played a prominent role in driving Aristide from power.

Industrialist Charles Henry Baker said companies that bid for contracts with the electoral council had all specified that the registration of the country's 4 million voters would require a minimum of six months.

"If the council cannot find enough time to register people, it will have to postpone the election," Baker told Reuters.

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