

**Rights groups press Haiti to halt violence.**

By Joseph Guyler Delva

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, April 19 (Reuters) - Failure by Haiti's government to tackle human rights abuses has encouraged lawlessness in the Caribbean state, where armed groups roam unchecked over wide areas, a rights group said on Tuesday.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said after a 16-day fact-finding mission that the government had virtually no control in some parts, where former soldiers had taken over policing and were illegally holding prisoners.

"We believe that the failure (by the government) to bring perpetrators to justice to establish accountability contributes to this climate of impunity, insecurity and lawlessness that prevails now in the country," said Anna Neistat, one of the group's researchers.

"There are areas where there is virtually no control, areas where no government authority is present," she said, citing Haiti's Central Plateau region as an example. Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas.

Neistat said she visited a couple of makeshift detention centers where former soldiers who were part of the rebel force that tossed out the president last year keep detainees.

"Ex-military basically take over the mission of providing security to the population (and) dealing with crime, which is absolutely not something they are authorized to do," she said.

Human Rights Watch researchers said in almost all the cases of abuses they have investigated, Haitian authorities had taken no action to bring those responsible to justice.

The presence of the police did not guarantee the situation would improve. The group said witnesses had reported summary executions and other abuses by the Haitian police, a civilian force created after the dreaded army was disbanded 10 years ago.

"We do believe it is extremely important to clean the police of those who are implicated in human rights violations," Neistat said.

Officials were not immediately available for comment. But Haiti's interim authorities have repeatedly rejected accusations of political persecution and human rights abuses. They blame violence on armed supporters of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The interim government was installed after Aristide fled last year amid a bloody rebellion by armed gangs and former members of Haiti's disbanded military. He was also under pressure from the United States and France to step down.

The government, led by Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, has scheduled national elections for November.

Despite the presence of a 7,400-strong U.N. peacekeeping force deployed to stabilize the country, analysts say

the rampant violence could delay the election.

The Committee to Protect the Rights of the Haitian People, a local rights group, said systematic violations of human rights were partly responsible for a spate of violence in which at least 670 people have been killed since September, including about 20 in a Port-au-Prince slum last weekend.

"When people's rights are systematically violated and authorities fail to act, the victims try to take justice into their own hands," said Ronald Saint-Jean, the group's leader.

At a news conference from exile in South Africa on Tuesday, Aristide called for his restoration as Haiti's president and urged an end to repression which he said had killed thousands of people in Haiti in the past year.

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