

Outrage over U.S. guns for Haiti police

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti · Human rights groups and South Florida Haitians expressed outrage on Friday over the admission that the U.S. government has been supplying the Haitian police force with thousands of weapons despite an arms embargo and is considering another major arms deal.

State Department and U.S. Embassy officials acknowledged the U.S. government gave 2,657 weapons in August 2004 to bolster Haiti's police despite allegations of human rights abuses and a 13-year-old arms embargo. The U.S. government is considering a request by the Haitian government to approve the sale of an additional \$1.9 million in weapons this year from a U.S.-based arms dealer, a State Department official said.

"Giving guns to the Haitian police is throwing gasoline on a fire," said Brian Concannon, director of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, an organization representing victims of alleged brutality by police.

Human rights observers have documented widespread abuses committed by the 4,000-member Haitian police under the U.S.-backed interim government of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, who assumed office last year after former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was removed from power amid an armed revolt.

Many of the alleged abuses have taken place in the poor neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, where support for Aristide runs strong. U.N. peacekeepers are investigating the allegations of abuse and a prison crackdown in which at least 10 detainees were killed.

According to a U.S. Embassy official, "any Haitian national police officer who is a weapons recipient would have to be vetted for past human rights offenses, trained appropriately and overseen by the U.S. and the international community."

A State Department official said the government had transferred nearly 2,800 firearms for use by the Haitian police force.

U.N. civilian police spokesman Dan Moskaluk defended the arms transfer as a means of standardizing and keeping track of the police force's weapons.

"Things aren't being given out in the back of a pickup truck. There are a lot of conditions," said Moskaluk. "There is a hodgepodge of different weaponry [in the police] and so one purpose of this is to equip them properly and standardize the issue."

But some observers warn that importing more arms could undermine a disarmament program that the U.N. peacekeeping force in Haiti is planning to launch in the coming weeks, pending negotiations with the government.

"The key question is how can we know that these arms will stay in the police force," said Gerardo Ducos, who monitors Haiti for Amnesty International. "Unless there is a reform within the national police to keep control of their arms, there is a real danger that these arms sooner or later will be circulating freely in Port-au-Prince and Haiti."

While the U.N. civilian police are charged with monitoring and training their Haitian counterparts, they are rarely seen in Haitian police stations or on patrols. Some observers have warned of the influential role former soldiers are playing in the police force. Aristide disbanded the notoriously corrupt and brutal Haitian military in 1995, and former soldiers led the revolt that ousted him in February 2004.

Hundreds of former soldiers have been incorporated into the police, and many top-ranking officers are members of the former military.

"It's quite clear in the last year there's been a kind of militarization of the police, which is quite worrying," said Ettore Di Benedetto, an analyst for the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.

In Miami, activist Marlene Bastien, director of the organization Haitian Women of Miami, was shocked when she learned about the arms transfer. She said Latortue should invest in clean water, health care, food and education for Haiti's poor.

"This is unconscionable that the government is spending money on arms while they should spend money to save precious lives," said Bastien. "People are dying of hunger. The poor have suffered enough."

The U.S. arms embargo against Haiti, which went into effect after a 1991 military coup that ousted Aristide from his first presidency, allows for "exceptions ... on a case-by-case basis."

Latortue has publicly complained that the international community has blocked the purchase of arms, which he has said are necessary to combat armed anti-government groups.

"If they persist in maintaining the arms embargo ... I will buy arms you know where," he told reporters last month, referring to the possibility of buying arms on the black market.

A South Florida-based arms dealer said in an interview with the Sun-Sentinel on Friday that Latortue tried to buy arms from him late last year.

Haitian-American Joel Deeb of Pembroke Pines said Latortue and his nephew and security adviser, Youri Latortue, contacted him in November 2004 in hopes of helping the Haitian government purchase \$533,333 worth of weapons, including M-16s, handguns and ammunition. He said the government wanted to buy \$1 million to \$2 million worth of weapons, but it didn't have the money.

Deeb, 50, a military contractor with clients in the Caribbean and Latin America, said the Latortues deposited the funds on Dec. 31 into a bank account in his name. But he said the deal has stalled because they failed to provide him with an end-users certificate, guaranteeing any weapons sold would be used only for lawful purposes.

"I don't have the end-user," said Deeb, who was arrested by the FBI in 1983 for exporting weapons and in connection with the bombing of public buildings in Port-au-Prince.

He blamed the arms embargo for stalling the deal.

Latortue and his nephew could not be reached for comment Friday.

Staff writer Thomas Monnay contributed to this report.

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