

Haiti Support Group press release - 25th April

What is the significance of the killing of the rebellious former soldiers' leader, Rémissainthe Ravix, and gang leader, René Jean Anthony, aka Grenn Sonnen (Ringing Balls), who were shot dead during joint Haitian police/UN operations over the weekend of 9-10th April?

Many international organisations have time and again pointed out that it would be impossible to either hold free elections or expect political violence to decrease while vast parts of the country remain - as they have done since February 2004 - under the control of former soldiers and allied armed gangs. However, months passed since the deployment of the UN peacekeeping mission, and although the UN had several thousand troops at its disposal, it took no action to end the very clear and visible presence of these illegal forces. Quite remarkably, the two military entities established a peaceful coexistence, even so far as operating road-block check points within a few hundred yards of each other.

The killing of Ravix and his ally, Grenn Sonnen, coming only weeks after UN troops had clashed with former soldiers in Petit-Goave and Terre Rouge - operations in which the UN suffered its first fatalities - suggested that the UN had at last got the message. In the immediate aftermath of the dramatic shoot-outs in Delmas and the northern suburbs of Port-au-Prince, most commentators opined that the UN had finally decided to get tough.

But two weeks later, with the high-profile visit of the UN Security Council members over and done, the dust has settled. Those who imagined that the Ravix/Grenn Sonnen killings heralded the start of a concerted campaign to rein in the former soldiers, thereby restoring the authority of the state and bolstering the rule of law, are sadly disappointed. Instead, the UN peacekeepers have resumed a focus on slugging it out with the capital's slum gangs - with all the usual 'collateral damage' that such street fighting entails. As for the former soldiers, the UN has gone back to just looking the other way.

It now seems clear that neither the UN nor the interim government have a 'problem' with the former soldiers and their allies, and - as long as they don't cause too much high-profile trouble in the capital - are content to leave them be. For the best part of nine months in 2004, Ravix had stayed in the Central Plateau, where the former soldiers have been allowed to create a 'state within a state'. Neither did the government or the UN seem to mind when towards the end of last year he moved to Petionville and set up a paramilitary base there.

However, when more recently he refused to disarm or accept the back pay offered by the government, and then was accused of murdering policemen and went on the radio to call for the overthrow of the government, he became a persona non grata. Things took a serious turn for the worse for him when he hooked up with Grenn Sonnen, a former soldier who had worked with the police carrying out 'dirty work' in support of the Lavalas Family government, but who had taken up arms against the police after the ouster of Aristide.

Grenn Sonnen and his gang - based in the lower Delmas area of the capital - grew in notoriety over recent months as his feud with the police grew ever more violent. He and Ravix were accused of a spate of attacks on the Port-au-Prince/Petionville business community, and of even shooting at UN soldiers. With the forthcoming visit of the UN Security Council shining a new spotlight on the

lawlessness in Haiti and on a looming election farce, then Ravix and Grenn Sonnen had to 'take the bullets' to demonstrate that the international community's intent.

Ravix - like too many Haitian leaders - seems to have had a deluded sense of his own importance, and perhaps he really believed he could lead an uprising to overthrow the interim government, chuck out the UN and re-establish the Army, the FAD'H. He badly miscalculated, believed his own rhetoric, whatever, his death is significant not for being the beginning of the end of the former soldiers rebel movement. Instead it will serve as a lesson to all the other former soldiers and their allies who have their eyes on political power.

Overt and violent challenges to the interim government and by implication to its international supporters will not be tolerated - especially not in the capital - but a low-profile, softly-softly approach, focused on the provinces, will surely continue to reap dividends.

In Gonaives for example, the Cannibal Army rebels and former FAD'H Army officer, Guy Philippe, have been allowed to re-invent themselves as the Front for National Reconstruction (FRN) political party. The FRN gunmen control most of the town, or at least the parts that count. FRN leader Winter Etienne is the government-appointed head of the Gonaives port, while another FRN leader, Butuer Metayer, provides security for the government regional delegate.

As for other parts of the country, the spokesperson for the recent Human Rights Watch delegation to Haiti made the following statement: "There are areas where there is virtually no control, areas where no government authority is present." She cited the Central Plateau region as an example, and said she had visited a couple of makeshift detention centres where former soldiers 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 authorised 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.

Last September, the Haitian Press Agency reported that the former soldiers based in the main provincial town in the south, Les Cayes, had started to reinstall former section chiefs throughout the South department. Section chiefs were the military-appointed rural police who controlled the population by use of violent and arbitrary techniques during the Duvalier regimes, and had been dismissed during the first Aristide government in the early 1990s.

The return of the section chief system, and its consequences, were spelt out by a recent Organisation of American States report. It states that in many parts of the country, including the North, North East and the Central Plateau, the former soldiers have "encouraged the return of former chefs de section, or appointed new ones. The chefs de section have been accused of human rights abuses, theft and extortion, and acting as police, and in some instances, judges.

There have been open conflicts with elected CASECs, the rural administrative unit created to replace the chefs de section, and whose mandate expired in 2004. Evidence suggests that the return of the chefs de section is part of the ex-FADH's political project to elect candidates who will advance the reinstatement of the army."

The rebuilding of the Army will be all the easier as the interim government has already re-integrated hundreds of former soldiers into the police force.

Its current strategy is to recruit hundreds more into the police force in time for the elections. After those elections, it will be just a small step to separate some of the PNH units off and rename them the FAD'H...