

# Council On Hemispheric Affairs

MONITORING POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND DIPLOMATIC ISSUES AFFECTING THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

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## Haiti: Few Reasons for Optimism but Many for Despair

- When it comes to Haiti, there are few heroes to point to, least of all interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue and his justice minister Bernard Gousse.
- Ten of the 15 member UN Security Council traveled to Haiti earlier this month to assess the UN's political transition and international peacekeeping mission on the island with Brazilian Ambassador Ronaldo Mota Sardenberg at the head of the April 13-16 mission.
- More than 400 people have been killed since Jean-Bertrand Aristide's ouster in February 2004.
- The United States continues to uphold its support for Latortue's government, going as far as to violate its 13 year-embargo of arms shipment to the nation island.
- Clashes between police, peacekeepers, former soldiers and pro- and anti-Aristide gangs have bred a climate of violence in Haiti that could delay scheduled fall elections.

### UN Security Council Visits Haiti

Since Jean-Bertrand Aristide's ouster on February 29, 2004, the international community has been trying to find a formula for political stability and security in Haiti, with scant success. Aristide's *Chimères* (street gangs), ex-soldiers, narco-trafficking gangs and common criminals continue to wreak havoc in the country. Against a backdrop of persisting violence, the UN Security Council visited the island April 13-16 to promote security, stability and human rights as well as lay the groundwork for national elections set for October and

November. Brazilian Ambassador Ronaldo Mota Sardenberg, who held the Council's rotating presidency for the month of March, described Haiti as "a problem for the region" and noted the visit as "a last chance to find a long term solution to the problems on the former French island." The country is stuck in a vicious cycle where an inept interim government manned by corrupt senior officials, the depressed state of the economy, the rise of criminal activity and public security problems feed off one another. But if elections are being looked to as a blessing on the horizon, can they also be looked upon with any confidence to restore political stability to Haiti?

### **A Climate of Violence and Instability**

Rémisainthe Ravix, the self-proclaimed head of the demobilized military and one of the leaders of the armed revolt that ousted Aristide last year was wanted by Haitian police (NHP) in connection with the killings of four policemen in February. He was gunned-down in Port-au-Prince on April 9 in a shootout with Haitian and UN civilian police (CIVPOL) when he tried to resist arrest after a raid in the Delmas industrial district complex. Another former military leader, Jean Anthony, and five other former soldiers were killed on April 10 in the suburbs of Delmas during a UN operation requested by the interim government. An ally of Ravix, Anthony was recently implicated in a number of murders, including the late March assassination of two police officers, a government official's chauffeur as well as extortion demands on civilians to provide protection gangsters units from attacking them. That same weekend, in the Port-au-Prince slum of Cité Soleil, a 15-year-old girl was killed and two other children were wounded when caught in a crossfire between UN troops and armed civilians. Four days earlier, police found the decapitated and burned body of an off-duty Haitian police officer on a street in St. Martin, a neighborhood near downtown Port-au-Prince. This was the fourth decapitation of a police officer reported in Haiti since September.

Haiti today is an unqualified mess, with the country not noticeably benefiting from the regime change so enthusiastically instituted by the Bush administration. As a result, Aristide's 2004 overthrow and his replacement by the interim government of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue shortly afterward, has produced hundreds of fatalities, few jobs and handle any social reforms or the introduction of basic law and order. A report titled "Securing Haiti's Transition: Reviewing Human Insecurity and the Prospects for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration," was released on April 7 by the Small Arms Survey, an independent research project located at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. The study, commissioned by the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAE), stated that "The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS) recently concluded that armed groups appear to control security in significant areas of the country and where the state is not providing effective protection for the people living in those regions." The DFAE report also found that at least 700 individuals died as a result of violence between September 2003 and December 2004, and three to four times that number were wounded. Additionally, "students aged 4 to 30 sustained the majority of firearm-related injuries, followed by police, commercial actors, and the private security sector."

The consequence of this constant state of violence extends well beyond the emotional and physical pain of daily death and injury tolls; it also has a direct impact on civilian mobility, access to markets and public services, the prices of goods and services, as well as the likelihood of domestic and foreign investments. Furthermore, almost all of the island's humanitarian efforts and development projects have been immobilized by the presence of a variety of armed factions and the overall prevailing chaos.

In certain parts of the country, armed groups are embedded in communities and are often supported by the locals. The DFAE report confirms that many individuals, in addition to members of military and criminal groups, are well armed and that local political power brokers are prepared to use violence to defend their sectarian interests. The report goes to charge that "the local monopoly of violence is now a benchmark of 'effective' leadership." It also suggests that "strategies to reduce armed violence and permanently remove weapons from society will therefore require an approach tailored to political, social, and economic dynamics of specific communities, entailing a process of painstaking negotiation with brokers, religious figures and politico-military leadership, as well as the provision of differentiated incentives." Therefore, Haiti needs a framework for embarking on sustainable and the meaningful disarmament and demobilization of unauthorized weaponry.

### **The U.S Continues its Unwavering Support of Latortue**

Congresswoman Maxine Waters (CA-35) released a statement denouncing last year's shipment of 2 600 used weapons to Haiti by the U.S. government authorities after the story was broken by former COHA researcher and now freelance journalist Reed Lindsay in the Washington Times. The delivery took place under the tenure of John Bolton while he served as Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs. The shipment specifically violated an arms embargo which went into effect in 1991 after the military coup had overthrown President Aristide. As reported in the Washington Times story, an official at the State Department said that the U.S. government was considering a request by the Haitian government to approve the sale of an additional \$1.9 million in weapons this year. While Latortue was publicly decrying the fact that the international community has been blocking the purchase of arms for Haiti, which he claims are necessary to combat armed factions, his critics were maintaining that it was due to the lack of professionalism on the part of the NHP that was a major factor in the violence besieging the nation. The shipment of U.S. arms could help the Haitian police provide security and tame armed factions, but the island's underlying problem is that the Haitian police possess almost no capacity for leadership. Many police officers are using their authority to improve their overall economic situation by taking bribes, some of them participate in drug trafficking operations or even carry out contract killings. Providing arms to such a dysfunctional body is not going to resolve the problem of violence in the country but rather only worsen an already debilitated situation.

### **Has the Interim Government Failed Haitians?**

Last March, 325 ex-soldiers symbolically surrendered arms to the country's provisional authorities in a solemn ceremony. Juan Gabriel Valdés, head of the Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), considers this a step toward ex-soldiers renouncing their violent

Setting up the voting infrastructure is not the only obstacle the election may face. Secretary General Rosemond Pradel, of the Provincial Electoral Council (CEP), the national body organizing the elections, told *Reuters* that preparations were behind schedule because of armed gangs, intimidation by former soldiers and general lawlessness. In a March 31 OAS statement, Denneth Modeste, the OAS secretary-general's special representative in Haiti, said the country's security situation is being marred by violence aimed at frustrating Haiti's electoral process. Late last March, violence even reached the CEP in Port-au-Prince when shots were fired in the vicinity of the institution before a grenade exploded in front of the CEP's main gate. Modeste stated that Haiti's stability is vital for elections to take place. Yet even the U.S., which despite fears of violence remained committed to elections in Iraq this past January, is now signalling that chaos in Haiti may be reason enough to back off from this fall's balloting.

Even though some international groups monitoring trouble spots around the world, say that without significant improvements in security, reconciliation and economic revival, the planned national elections are unlikely to produce a legitimate government, members of the Security Council stated on April 14 that the UN may expand its peacekeeping mission to include more police and add international observers before the upcoming elections are staged. But, as reported by *AFP*, Ambassador Sardenberg, found that the upcoming "elections represent a fundamental political moment in Haiti" and insisted upon the necessity of maintaining the election scheduled as planned.

### **Will Elections Restore Political Stability to Haiti?**

On March 29, Lavalas supporters demonstrated in the streets of Cap-Haitien to demand the return of a constitutional government and an end to the political persecution of pro-Aristide militants. The several thousand demonstrators carried signs saying that the violence inflicted against them would not prevent them from remaining mobilized. But on April 19, Aristide held a rare press conference in Pretoria, South Africa, where he stated he would not seek re-election as the constitution does not allow a sitting president to pursue more than two mandates. This could be interpreted as a blessing for Aristide's supporters to go out and select a new candidate to run for the presidency.

Although Aristide called upon Haitians to elect a new president, it remains imperative that the disarmament program be accelerated due to the continued violence and repression found throughout the country. Nevertheless, without a habitat of peace and stability, Haiti is doomed to remain one of the poorest countries in the world, stuck in a continuing hapless cycle of underdevelopment and violence.

*This analysis was prepared by COHA Research Associate Isabelle Roux.*

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