

**Aristide's Ex-PM Refuses to Leave Haiti**

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) - A former prime minister on a hunger strike refused to leave for medical treatment in the Dominican Republic, demanding instead his unconditional release from house arrest, the government said Monday.

Yvon Neptune, who has been held without charge for 10 months in connection with political killings during the February 2004 rebellion that ousted Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was scheduled to be taken to a hospital in the Dominican capital, Santo Domingo.

Neptune, 58, refused medical evacuation to the neighboring Spanish-speaking country, according to an interim Haitian government statement obtained Monday by The Associated Press. He renewed a hunger strike 13 days ago and some say his condition is critical.

"Yvon Neptune said he won't accept the medical evacuation unless all the charges leveled against him have been withdrawn," the statement says. "Such a demand is absolutely unacceptable. Mr. Yvon Neptune remains at the disposal of the judicial system for the pursuit of the investigation."

The interim government accuses Neptune of orchestrating the killings of Aristide opponents in the western town of St. Marc during the rebellion. Neptune has not seen a judge and has not heard the charges against him, although Haitian law says he should have within 48 hours after his arrest, said lawyer Mario Joseph, who works with the pro-Aristide Defense of Political Prisoners Group.

Neptune, who served as prime minister when Aristide was president, denies the allegations against him.

Interim government officials for months have resisted international pressure to release Neptune, unwilling to give in to what some are calling the blackmail of a hunger strike.

"There is no legal explanation for Neptune's prolonged detention. The only explanation is that the government wants to keep its political enemy in prison as long as possible," Joseph said. "He is purely and simply demanding his release."

Joseph said Neptune was continuing his hunger strike and that his condition was "critical and worsening."

Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue and his justice minister could not be reached for further comment on Monday -- a national holiday.

Haiti has been in turmoil since Aristide fled the country. More than 600 people have been killed since Aristide supporters in September stepped up protests to demand his return from exile in South Africa. Many fear the violence could thwart efforts to hold elections in October and November.

Neptune was still under house arrest Monday in a luxury suburb, where he was moved earlier this month after

being hospitalized to recover from a 19-day hunger strike, Joseph said. Neptune resumed the hunger strike 13 days ago.

Latortue's office said Saturday night he had appointed a cardiologist, urologist and psychiatrist to tend to Neptune but that Haitian law forbids force-feeding a person who is conscious and refuses nourishment.

Neptune initially was considered a traitor by Aristide loyalists when he handed power to an interim president, Chief Justice Boniface Alexandre, within days of Aristide's Feb. 29, 2004, flight as rebels converged on Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince.

At the time, he resisted pressure to go into exile from diplomats and interim government officials installed after U.S. troops arrived.

After his arrest in June, he became a rallying point for both militants demanding the release of hundreds of Aristide officials and loyalists jailed without charge, and for human rights activists demanding he be tried.

Associated Press writers Michael Norton in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Jose P. Monegro in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, contributed to this report.

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