

HAÏTI

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Death and despair plague Haitians in one of hemisphere's worst slums, despite UN's presence

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — Like most residents of Cité Soleil, Marie-Maude Fabien knew enough to stay close to home when she heard gunfire. But the morning of April 23 was quiet, and she felt it was safe to fetch water being sold a few blocks away.

Shots rang out, and when her husband found her, the 28-year-old mother of five was dead, a bullet through her chest, and the gunmen were gone.

Add one more name to the list of victims in the seaside slum since a ruthless inter-gang war broke out in September. This time, however, witnesses said UN peacekeepers - not gang members - had been shooting in the area and were responsible. It is not clear why Fabien was shot, but witnesses agree the shooting seemed unprovoked.

"There were no other gunshots," said Osner Paul, 30, Fabien's husband, as he jiggled their wailing 2-month-old son on his knee. "I can't go out to work now, because I have to take care of him. I have nothing."

Brazilian Commander Carlos Chagas, assistant to Lt. Gen. Augusto Heleno, who commands the UN troops, said he did not know of any civilian victims, but, "For an international force that comes from a

different culture, speaks a totally different language and, more important, is not familiar with the people living there, it's very difficult to identify who is who."

Violence occurs out of sight

The inter-gang warfare that consumed Cité Soleil appears to be over, but five months after peacekeepers marched into this slum, violence rages: Residents say the gangs, now working together, continue to murder, rape and rob in the alleyways, out of sight of the Jordanian peacekeepers who rarely leave the main roads or the safety of their armored personnel carriers. Meanwhile, a monthlong campaign by the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, or Minustah, to hunt down gang leaders has had few visible results except frequent gun battles between peacekeepers and gangs - and more civilian deaths.

"Things were calm when Minustah first came, but now it's becoming violent again," said coffin maker Pierre Wilfrid, 32, who said business is still bad because people cannot afford coffins.

In mid-December, Brazilian and Jordanian soldiers established a permanent presence in Cité Soleil, putting a partial end to the battle between gang leaders Emmanuel "Dread" Wilme, who claims to be fighting for the return of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and Thomas "Labanye" Robinson, an unspoken ally of the government of interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue. But gang activity gradually resumed. Then, in March, Robinson was reportedly assassinated by his second-in-command and the battle lines were redrawn, with the gangs now united under Wilme and facing off with Jordanian soldiers teamed with Haitian police.

While the UN presence was widely welcomed in December, some residents now blame the peacekeepers for shooting indiscriminately into the slum's warren of cinder-block and rusted sheet-metal houses. The UN and Haitian police say "armed bandits" were killed; hospital workers and the Red Cross say some of the recent gunshot victims have been women and children.

"Innocent people are dying"

"Do you think in such a crowded city we can have a military operation without civilian casualties?" asked Lt. Col. Elouaifi Boulbars, a Moroccan peacekeeper and Minustah spokesman. "Our concern is to limit collateral damages, but we cannot stand with our hands tied."

"Minustah is not able to distinguish between the population and the gang members and, as a result, a lot of innocent people are dying," said Evel Fanfan, a human rights lawyer advocating for UN victims in Cité Soleil. He and other critics say the peacekeepers should be more

assertive, not with brute force but by pushing disarmament.

"Maybe they can't negotiate with Dread Wilme, but they should be able to convince most of the gang members around him to put down their weapons," said Jean Jorel Corneille, the anti-Aristide mayor of Cité Soleil who was appointed by the interim government. A UN-led national disarmament program that would provide various incentives for gang members to hand over weapons has still not taken effect more than 11 months after the peacekeepers arrived, but an agreement has been signed to implement it.

Equally brutal opponents

Meanwhile, plans by the Haitian government and international donors to spend millions to rebuild Cité Soleil, considered one of the most destitute slums in Latin America, have yet to be realized, other than a handful of projects and sporadic food handouts by peacekeepers. Aristide and his Lavalas party maintain strong support in Cité Soleil, as in most poor neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince. But many Cité Soleil residents, who are sympathetic to Aristide, are also quietly afraid and resentful of the gangs that declare they are fighting for his return while committing crimes and atrocities against the population. Some say Wilme's gang and Robinson's now-defunct anti-Aristide gang were equally brutal.

The Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, an independent human rights group, has documented more than 80 cases of women and girls as young as 13 who have been raped by gangs of all allegiances in Cité Soleil since September. One victim said she was grateful to peacekeepers for stemming the violence. "If Minustah was not here, many more people would be dead," she said.

But the woman, a 47-year-old mother of three, said she feels no safer than when peacekeepers arrived in December. Her cousin was killed and her 13-year-old daughter was shot in the arm by gang members in March. She sleeps on cardboard on a concrete floor in a neighbor's home since gangs stole all her possessions last year and reduced her home to rubble. "Every day, my daughter cries because she wants to leave Cité Soleil," the woman said. "I'm afraid. If I had money, I would have left the Cité already. I could be shot at anytime. Just like others have died, I could die, too."

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