



**Haiti's ex-PM appears before a judge**

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, May 26 (Reuters) - Haiti's former prime minister, imprisoned without formal charges for 11 months, finally appeared before a judge to answer accusations that he masterminded a massacre of opponents over a year ago.

Yvon Neptune, who has been on a hunger strike since April 17, was taken on Wednesday to St. Marc, about 60 miles (100 km) north of Port-au-Prince, to be heard by a court for the first time since his arrest last June.

Haiti's constitution provides that a suspect should be brought before a judge within 48 hours of arrest.

Neptune, whose detention has prompted expressions of concern from human rights organizations and the United Nations, was so weak that he could not walk.

"He had to be transported on a stretcher into the hearing room, where he spent about four hours," Ronald St-Jean, head of the Committee to Protect the Rights of the Haitian People, said on Thursday.

"It is a good step. We hope Mr. Neptune's rights, which have been violated since the beginning of the process, will finally be respected," he said.

Neptune, who served under ousted president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, is detained on accusations that he masterminded what Aristide opponents have called a massacre on Feb. 11, 2004, in La Syrie, a small village, near St-Marc.

**"POLITICAL LYNCHING"**

A U.N. expert on human rights who visited the area to investigate the case has rejected the idea of a massacre, arguing that the deaths recorded in that region in February resulted from a series of confrontations between pro- and anti-Aristide groups.

Aristide fled the country on Feb. 29, 2004, in the face of a month-long armed revolt and under U.S. and French pressure to quit. He is living in exile in South Africa.

Some Haitian lawyers have argued that Neptune's arrest was illegal because he was not invited to appear before an investigating judge before he was arrested.

The government says Neptune has been charged in connection with killings at La Syrie. But some legal experts say that under Haitian law, formal charges would come only after a judge says there is enough evidence to proceed with the case.

Patrick Elie, who attended the hearing as an observer for Neptune, said the former prime minister "rejected all the accusations brought against him, explaining that his arrest and detention was a political lynching."

He said Neptune had never sought to escape justice and had not given up his hunger strike, which he started to protest his detention.

"Neptune had challenged judicial authorities, because he believes he is the victim of a political lynching that has nothing to do with justice," Elie said. "If it is about justice and not about political revenge, I am confident that Neptune will be released."

HAITI-NEPTUNE|LANGEN|G|RBN|AFA|CSA|LBY|RWSA|RWS|REULB|GNS|RNP|PGE|SXNA

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