

## Civil society organizations speak out against military-style solutions

### Haitian civil society organizations are criticizing the international community's latest proposals to deal with continuing violence in many districts of the capital, Port-au-Prince - 30 May 2005

For Rose-Anne Auguste, who runs a women's health and sex education center in a poor district in the south of the capital, the only way to deal with gang violence is to address the extreme socio-economic situation facing the majority of the population.

"Young people growing up in Carrefour-Feuilles and the neighboring area of Martissant are good people, creative people, but after five or ten years with no economic development and no prospect of being able to improve their lives, they will inevitably become chimères (gangsters)."

Since the beginning of October 2004, nearly 700 people have been killed and thousands more wounded in political and gang violence. Many of the deaths are the result of clashes between, on one side, the local police and the United Nations stabilization mission, known as MINUSTAH, and on the other, armed gangs, some of them loyal to ousted president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

On 20 May, U.N. Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, proposed that the MINUSTAH be increased in size in an effort to control the spiral of violence ahead of general elections planned for later this year. Annan is recommending the deployment of an additional 800 troops, bringing the total to 7,500, and of an additional 275 U.N. policemen to join the 1,622 officers already on the ground.

But for Guyler Delva, head of the Haitian Journalists' Association (AJH), the solution to the violence is not a military one.

He said, "We have to find a way so that those with weapons don't have a reason to use them anymore. It is not a question of more troops. You could have 20,000 troops, but there is still no way they could be present in every corner of this city, let alone the whole country."

Camille Chalmers, director of the Alternative Development Advocacy Platform, (PAPDA), agrees that sending more soldiers won't resolve anything. "We don't have a military problem. There is no war in Haiti."

Chalmers goes further, stating that in his opinion the MINUSTAH presence in the country is unwelcome. "Violence happens with or without MINUSTAH, and sometimes they even help the police attack people." He continues, "Insecurity is worse today than it was one year ago (when MINUSTAH was first deployed)."

In response to the serious increase in violence in recent months, interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue has repeatedly called on the United States to lift a 13-year old arms embargo on Haiti, arguing that the Haitian police force doesn't have enough guns to effectively fight the armed gangs.

Reports from Washington suggest that the U.S. will look favorably on Latortue's request to purchase weapons costing U.S.\$1.9 million. The purchase - expected to go through later this year - will secure some 3,000 .38 caliber pistols, several hundred rifles and shotguns, as well as tear-gas grenades and

launchers.

But in April, the National Association for the Promotion of Decentralization and Local Development, issued a statement saying that the drive to arm the police is mistaken, particularly in light of human rights organizations' allegations that some police officers have been carrying out extra-judicial executions of suspected pro-Aristide activists.

Patrick Elie, an activist who in recent years has campaigned for justice for murdered journalist, Jean Dominique, said, "The police are not under-armed, they are improperly armed. Most police officers now carry weapons better adapted to war than to police work."

According to Elie, the U.N. mission should reconsider its current policy of helping the Haitian police mount raids on the shanty-town strongholds of armed gangs, because ordinary residents are being caught in the crossfire. Instead, he says, the MINUSTAH should reinforce its tutoring role, making sure that the police strictly observe proper procedures and human rights norms.

PAPDA's Chalmers also thinks that the police force needs a complete overhaul, and he says that the funds currently being spent on the MINUSTAH should instead pay for the cost of that task. "MINUSTAH costs U.S.\$25 million a month. This amount is being borrowed by the Haitian State, and must be paid back later by the Haitian people. Imagine...that aid could be used to completely rebuild the police force in less than ten months."

For Chalmers, the lack of disarmament is another serious problem, and he is critical of the MINUSTAH's failure to implement an effective program. "MINUSTAH could disarm. It could do it in 3 months, and then leave."

The AJH's Guy Delva believes that a complex situation cannot be resolved by using more weapons. "What is needed is a political approach. The first step is to have a real dialogue. To talk about the problems experienced by the poor."

He rejects the attempt of many of the country's political leaders and a number of powerful local media outfits to characterize all the inhabitants of poor areas as gangsters. "Thousands of people take part in demonstrations against the interim government, but there are not thousands of gangsters. The people in the slums feel neglected."

Chalmers is another who is promoting national dialogue as the only solution to the violence and insecurity, but he rejects the process recently started by the interim government. "We need a genuine national dialogue...to look at the country's real problems - the economy and the political institutions. Unfortunately, the government has closed down the possibility of a genuine dialogue by prohibiting certain questions from appearing on the agenda."

A version of this article was first published by Hardbeatnews, 30 May 2005 :  
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