

**U.S. Ambassador: Haiti Gangs Are a Problem**

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) - U.N. peacekeepers must do more to combat the armed gangs now destabilizing Haiti before elections to fill the power vacuum left after former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's ouster, the U.S. ambassador to Haiti said.

Ambassador James Foley said Haitian police, armed mostly with pistols and shotguns, are outgunned by pro-Aristide gangs armed with heavy machine guns. The gangs have been blamed for increasing violence and kidnappings.

"But U.N. forces are not outgunned. They have the force to counter the gangs and have to figure out a way to do it," Foley said in an interview Wednesday with The Associated Press.

Foley acknowledged it would be difficult for peacekeepers to more aggressively confront and disarm gangs, action that could result in U.N. casualties. Seven peacekeepers have been killed since the mission began in June 2004. Three have been killed during shootouts with armed gangs.

Still, the peacekeepers "accepted a mission that is vital to protect a people in dire straits," said Foley. "They've got to do more."

Earlier Wednesday, U.N. spokesman in Haiti Toussaint Kongo-Doudou told reporters that peacekeepers were increasing vigilance in slum neighborhoods, where much of the violence happens and which are filled with Aristide supporters.

He said that disarmament "was a process, and we are progressing."

Foley said the main thrust of recent violence came from armed Aristide supporters, who have been effective in paralyzing the interim government's attempts to stabilize the country.

Meanwhile, gunmen killed a French diplomat who was driving in Haiti's capital and stole his car, the French Embassy said Wednesday. The killing of Paul-Henri Mourral, France's honorary consul to the northern city of Cap-Haitien, came less than a week after both the U.S. and French governments issued travel warnings for Haiti, citing a deteriorating security situation.

In Washington, the State Department and Congress were discussing a program to train Haitian police. An agreement would overturn a 14-year U.S. arms embargo to Haiti, though U.S. officials acknowledged in April they had given 2,600 used firearms to Haitian police last year.

That brought criticism from some Haitians who pointed to accusations that police have committed myriad human rights violations, including shooting and killing peaceful pro-Aristide protesters and summary executions of political enemies. Police have denied the accusations.

"I don't think it's tenable to say the police can't be armed, given the gangs' firepower," said Foley. "But it's also not tenable to give the police arms without strict controls."

This week the endemic violence manifested itself at Port-au-Prince's major Tete Boeuf market, where armed men opened fire Tuesday and started a fire that spread throughout the marketplace. At least seven people died.

Human rights groups estimate more than 700 people -- including 40 police officers -- have been killed since Aristide supporters stepped up protests in September to demand his return from exile in South Africa.

Aristide's Lavalas Family Party -- probably still the largest in Haiti -- says elections cannot go forward while the interim government illegally detains hundreds of Aristide supporters and officials without charge.

The U.S.-backed interim government and a 7,400-member peacekeeping mission took over after Aristide fled an armed rebellion in February 2004.

Elections are scheduled for October and November, but interim government officials and human rights groups have said the increasing violence must be curbed for Haitians to feel safe voting.

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