

REUTERS **Up to 25 people killed as police raid Haiti slums**

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, June 4 (Reuters) - As many as 25 people were killed in police raids on Friday and Saturday in the slums of Haiti's capital after the government said it would get tougher on gangs, morgue workers and witnesses said.

Clerks at the morgue in the General Hospital said they had taken in 17 bodies on Saturday and three bodies on Friday after the raids in Bel-Air and other Port-au-Prince slums, centers of support for ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

A Reuters journalist also saw five other bodies in two different areas of Bel-Air.

Residents said the dead were shot by police and accused police of setting slum homes on fire.

Police officials had no immediate comment on the death toll and it was not clear whether all the victims were killed in the raids, or if some were shot as gang members returned fire.

Haiti's interim government, backed by a 7,400-strong United Nations peacekeeping force, has sought to stabilize the impoverished Caribbean country since Aristide fled into exile as armed rebels closed in on the capital in February 2004.

Human rights groups have accused the Haitian police of summary executions and abuses against supporters of Aristide -- allegations denied by the government.

Justice Minister Bernard Gousse and other officials said on Friday authorities planned tougher action against armed gangs in pro-Aristide slums, where victims of a recent wave of hundreds of kidnappings are often said to be held.

At least 740 people have been killed in criminal and political violence in Haiti since September. A French diplomat was shot to death this week while driving in the capital.

"The police arrived, they started shooting. There were other people shooting too, but they managed to flee," said Ronald Macillon, a Bel-Air resident. "The police killed a lot of people and set several homes on fire," Macillon said.

Several other witnesses gave similar accounts.

A spokesman for U.N. troops in Bel-Air, Col. Carlos Barcelos, told Reuters the Brazilian contingent based in that slum did not take part directly in the raids, but put up checkpoints and secured the outside perimeter.

The Central Director for the Administrative Police, Renan Etienne, told Reuters he could not say how many people were killed or comment on allegations police set homes on fire, as he had not yet received police reports.

