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Crackdown on violence urged ; U.S. official says U.N. peacekeepers must be more proactive

Reed Lindsay, THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti

A Bush administration official called yesterday for U.N. peacekeepers to crack down on violent political groups in Haiti but would not confirm a report that the United States may send troops back to the troubled island.

"We urge [the peacekeepers] to seize the initiative, respond to this wave of criminality and be more proactive to dissuade violence," said Roger Noriega, the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, at the end of a two-day visit.

A wave of politically motivated attacks and killings has prompted the interim government in Haiti to ask for more help to secure the country ahead of elections scheduled for October, the first since President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was toppled in February 2004.

Cabinet chief Michel Bruinache was quoted on Tuesday saying the country would welcome American forces, apparently in response to a Washington Post editorial this week that said the U.S. Embassy in Haiti had asked Washington to consider sending several hundred U.S. Marines.

But Mr. Noriega, when asked about the report yesterday, said: "We would never comment on security plans that we would be considering."

In Washington, a Pentagon spokesman said there were "no plans" to send Marines back to Haiti, where they established security last year before turning over the mission to the 7,400-strong U.N. stability force.

At U.S. Southern Command in Miami, which oversees U.S. military operations in the region, Lt. Cmdr. Chris Loundermon said: "We are monitoring the situation in Haiti ... but I can't talk about any future plans."

Mr. Noriega, accompanied by representatives of the French and Canadian governments, blamed the violence in Haiti on "politicians using criminality for political ends," though it was not clear to who he was referring.

A recent report by the International Crisis Group identified several "spoilers" who could threaten the elections, including drug traffickers, former soldiers and their political and financial backers; politicians fearing a victory by Mr. Aristide's Lavalas Party, and armed gangs acting for and against Lavalas.

The peacekeeping force has received sharp criticism from the interim government for not taking a harder line against pro- Aristide gangs, while human rights groups have criticized it for doing little to stop abuses by the Haitian police, including arbitrary arrests and shooting into peaceful demonstrations.

U.N. peacekeepers must "become more aggressive to fight with gangs," Mr. Brunache said Tuesday. "They need the Marines."

Mr. Noriega met in Haiti with leaders of political parties, the peacekeeping force and the Organization of American States, which is helping with voter registration. It is far behind schedule.

"It is clear that [the election authorities] have to undertake some practical steps in an urgent way to organize the way they work and make decisions to [register] a preponderance of the voters by mid-August," Mr. Noriega said.

c Rowan Scarborough in Washington contributed to this report.

Caption: Noriega [NO CREDIT]; A U.N. Police tank patrolled the streets of Port-au-Prince yesterday, where the United Nations' representative in Haiti, Juan

Gabriel Valdes, announced that peacekeepers will continue to provide security in the wake of the recent wave of violence in the Haitian capital. Currently, a 7,400-strong U.N. peacekeeping force is in place. [Photo by Agence France-
Presse/Getty Images]