



# INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE & DEMOCRACY IN HAITI

## Haiti Information Project

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### **There is no political persecution in Haiti.**

On June 11, Special Representative and Head of the U.N. Mission in Haiti Juan Gabriel Valdes, made a statement on Haitian radio stations declaring he had lived through the Pinochet dictatorship and, "compared to that experience, there is no political persecution in Haiti."

Although his comment was broadcast throughout Haiti's capital, it was ridiculous enough to be ignored by the mainstream international media. More ominously, Valdes comments mirror those of Haiti's traditional economic and political elites, the very forces that are working to close the door on national reconciliation and to exclude Aristide's Lavalas party from participating in the upcoming elections. His words also represent a dangerous shift in U.N. policy in Haiti following what appeared to be a period of acknowledgement of the daily reality of political repression against Lavalas supporters.

For a short time there was hope that the U.N. was serious about checking the rabid hatred of Haiti's elites towards Lavalas and addressing the human rights violations of the Haitian police. The commander of U.N.

forces in Haiti, Brazilian Lt. Gen. Augusto Heleno Ribeiro, protested after the Haitian police fired on a peaceful demonstration by supporters of ousted president Jean-Bertrand Aristide on Feb. 28.

According to the Associated Press (AP) Ribeiro said on March 1, "police killings had poisoned an atmosphere that peacekeepers had been working to improve for two months." Ribeiro continued, "But police went there and killed six people on Friday ... now we're being received with a completely different attitude." On March 4, Valdes himself was quoted in the Miami Herald, "We cannot tolerate executions□we can't tolerate shooting out of control. We will not permit human rights abuses."

According to the Herald, Valdes also promised that, "U.N. peacekeepers will intervene - and use force if necessary - if Haitian police attack unarmed civilians again."

After the police killings of Feb. 28, the U.N. reacted by barring the Haitian police from security duties during demonstrations the following week. This U.N. policy is short-lived as interim Justice Minister Bernard Gousse claims that the limits placed on the police by the U.N.

are illegal and usurp the rights of the Haitian state. The U.N. backs down to the pressure and allows the Haitian police to resume the killing during another peaceful demonstration on April 27. This attack prompts another outcry by human rights organizations and finally forces U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan to echo their demands for an official investigation. The U.S.-installed

government of Gerard Latortue dismissed the allegations and the statements of Ribera, Valdes and Annan despite video footage taken by a local television station confirming the unprovoked attacks. The video footage also showed members of Haiti's police force planting guns on corpses to justify the slayings on April 27.

Valdes reportedly asked Leslie Voltaire, a former official in Aristide's administration before his ouster, about the existence of this video footage. According to Voltaire, Valdes was not even aware that the footage had been broadcast several times on a local television station. According to Voltaire, "He didn't even know that the television station existed." Since then, Valdes and the U.N. have completely ignored the evidence of extra-judicial killings committed by the Haitian police and have failed to launch an investigation.

The U.N.'s inaction for holding the police accountable sent a clear message throughout Haiti society that impunity for crimes committed by the Haitian police would be tolerated. It was exactly this message of impunity that set the tone and context for the recent wave of kidnappings and violence plaguing Port au Prince. It also served to confirm for Lavalas supporters that the U.N. was itself complicit in the killings, especially after its military forces were seen to resume collaboration with the police in subsequent deadly raids against poor neighborhoods of the capital.

In the absence of holding the police accountable, the only thing lacking was an official justification for the U.N.'s continuing collaboration with the police and turning a blind-eye to their human rights record.

On May 27, this justification was provided by the Haitian elite and delivered by the President of the Haitian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dr. Reginald Boulos. During this meeting between the business community and Haiti's Chief of Police Leon Charles, Boulos demanded the U.S.-installed government of Gerard Latortue allow the business community to form their own private security firms and arm them with automatic weapons. This was clearly a demand to legalize the business community's own private militias to kill what Boulos, and others in his circle, have referred to as "Lavalas bandits." Boulos also suggested the Latortue regime allow businesses to withhold taxes for one month and use the money to buy more powerful weapons for the police on the international market. These statements served the dual purpose of pressuring the U.N. with the image of government sanctioned private militias killing off Lavalas supporters while providing another pretext for the Bush administration to lift the 14 year-old arms embargo against Haiti. "If they don't allow us to do this then we'll take on our own initiative and do it anyway" Boulos threatened.

Following Boulos statements, Chief of Police Leon Charles addressed the business leaders and further politicized the issue of violence and insecurity casting it as a "war against urban guerillas" bent on destabilizing the Haitian government. Without saying Lavalas, Charles used the code word that has come to describe Aristide's political party among Haiti's entrenched elites, "bandits."

In the days following May 27, other members of Haiti's business elite began to criticize the U.N. for being too soft on the "bandits" demanding they take harsher action. Industrialist and virulent Aristide opponent, Charles Henry Baker, took to the airwaves on May 30 and pushed it one step further by accusing U.N. forces of providing protection to the "bandits." Baker stated on Radio Metropole, "Yesterday morning, when I saw MINUSTAH [UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti] troops positioned on the Airport

Road, I told myself we were in big trouble.

Because the presence of MINUSTAH troops is, I believe, a form of protection for the armed bandits and nothing more. The bandits are indeed at work in these places. As for the police [pauses] and as for the MINUSTAH troops, once they hear shooting, they just get inside their tanks for protection and do nothing. Meanwhile, the bandits do whatever they want."

The pressure campaign by Haiti's elite reaches critical mass as the U.N. and the Haitian police launch a major offensive against the poor neighborhood of Cite Soleil on the morning of May 31. According to residents, the U.N. and the police entered the area and began shooting indiscriminately in the street and at homes without provocation. Elie Theodore was running from the gunfire when a bullet struck him in the back of the head. He did not die instantly and writhed in pain as blood and brains flowed out of the back of his head. Solange Emitide ran for cover into her house and hid under the bed when two bullets struck her in the back. Solange managed to crawl out to the front of her house where she died in a puddle of her own blood. Panicked children fled their schools to return home through plumes of black smoke as automatic weapons fire hit propane tanks used for cooking and set several buildings ablaze. None of this received any mention on Haitian radio stations in the capital or in subsequent reports filed by the international press. What did catch their attention was an attack by unidentified gunmen on a large market on the outskirts of Cite Soleil called Marche Te Bouef. Several people are burned to death in the market after the same gunmen reportedly throw Molotov cocktails setting the structure ablaze.

The next day the Haitian elite, echoed in the international press, accuse the now infamous "Lavalas bandits" of striking again. The rhetoric calling for U.N. military actions against the poor neighborhoods intensifies in the Haitian press as accusations of human rights abuses by the Haitian police are conveniently forgotten.

Ironically, on the same day Sanel Joseph is laid to rest in a funeral conducted by Father Gerard Jean-Juste in Cite Soleil. Following another peaceful Lavalas demonstration on May 18, the Haitian police gunned down Joseph as he returned home. During the homily Jean-Juste declared, "Sanel died standing up for the Haitian constitution. He believed in the law but now the law has been turned against the poor and those who stand for justice. There is no justice in Haiti today!"

On June 3, the Haitian police begin four days of operations against the population in the neighborhood of Bel Air. Journalists entering the neighborhood were shown huge pools of blood where victims were reportedly shot without warning and residents indicated that more than 30 people have been killed during the police raids. More than 12 homes were reportedly burned to the ground in what many human rights observers have described as a "scorched earth" policy being used by the Haitian police. Residents also reported being unable to flee indiscriminate shooting by the police without running into roadblocks and checkpoints set up by U.N. forces surrounding the area. Many complained of arbitrary arrests of relatives by U.N. forces collaborating with the Haitian police as they tried to escape the gunfire.

The U.N. backed raids and killings in Bel Air, meant to assuage Haiti's elite, were apparently not enough to insure compliance with the plans of U.S. policymakers. On June 5, a Sunday editorial in The Washington Post reports that the "U.S. Embassy in Haiti had recommended sending a small force of U.S. Marines to secure elections scheduled for October and November." Michel

Brunache, Haiti's Cabinet chief responded in the Associated Press on June 6, "We hope the U.S. government will move quickly with any plans because the situation is very grave, and 1,000 Marines would make a difference."

The U.S. government also announces on June 8 that it plans on lifting the 14 year-old arms embargo against Haiti. During a ceremony at which the U.S. Embassy donated \$2.6 million worth of equipment to the Haitian police, U.S. Ambassador James B. Foley stated, "Those weapons are a very important element in the capacity of the Haitian police to ensure security." To emphasize the U.S. policy of further militarizing Haiti's police, US assistant secretary for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega arrives in Haiti the same day. Echoing the criticisms of Haiti's elite Noriega says to the international press; "We regard it as extremely important that the United Nations take the necessary measures to fulfill their mandate." Without considering the death toll in Bel Air prior to his visit Noriega continued, "It is urgent that they respond to the wave of violence and to the insecurity to assure the Haitian people that they are safe."

The international community and the U.N. forces are on the ground in Haiti to prepare for new elections and "restore democracy." Given the tremendous human tragedy left in the wake of the overthrow of Aristide, elections are the only process left to legitimize the carnage. The U.N. is hostage to Haiti's ultra-reactionary elite and U.S. foreign policy that dictates that elections can only be held if violence is eradicated by military force and more guns. Any attempt to address the underlying causes of violence in Haiti today is inconvenient because it means recognizing the political repression being meted upon Lavalas. It means confessing that the Haitian police have been given carte blanche to kill peaceful demonstrators with impunity. It means recognizing the plight of Lavalas political prisoners being held without charges in Haitian jails. It means admitting that Haiti's largest political party-is justified in not participating in the next elections. It means admitting that Juan Gabriel Valdes is lying and knows better when he says, "there is no political persecution in Haiti."

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