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**U.N. envoy in Haiti wants jailed ex-PM released**

By Joseph Guyler Delva

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, June 23 (Reuters) - The U.N. special envoy to Haiti called on Haitian authorities on Thursday to release former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, jailed a year ago on accusations he masterminded a massacre in February 2004.

Neptune, who served under former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was accused of instigating what Aristide foes have called a massacre of government opponents on Feb. 11, 2004, in a village near St.-Marc, 60 miles (100 km) north of Port-au-Prince. The deaths -- versions of how many people died range up to 50 -- occurred during an armed revolt that forced Aristide from power last year.

Neptune, who was charged in May, has rejected the accusations, which he says were politically motivated, and has reportedly refused food since mid-April to protest his detention.

U.N. envoy Juan Gabriel Valdes criticized the way the judicial system had handled Neptune's case and suggested the former prime minister could be freed while the case was prosecuted.

"Our appreciation of the legal system and the procedures followed indicate to us that it would be perfectly possible to release Mr. Neptune from prison even if his case continued to be processed," Valdes told reporters.

"We believe that serious attention should be given to Neptune's release," he said.

The Neptune case has become a focal point for critics of the interim government that replaced Aristide and is battling chronic political and criminal violence in the poorest country in the Americas. Critics say authorities have rounded up many Aristide supporters without cause. The government has denied any political persecution.

Journalists and human rights activists who visited the scene the day after the suspected massacre in La Syrie was announced saw five bodies, but other groups have said up to 50 people were killed.

A U.N. independent expert on human rights, Louis Joinet, rejected the notion of a massacre after he visited St.-Marc in April. Joinet said people who died were killed in confrontations between pro- and anti-Aristide groups in St.-Marc during February last year and there were victims on both sides.

The government appointed a new justice minister this week to replace Bernard Gousse, who had been criticized for the Neptune case and for a chaotic judicial system in which most of those in prison have not been tried.

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