

Haiti Violence

by Kevin Pina and Dennis Bernstein; FlashPoints; October 11, 2004

Bernstein: A glittering example of U.S. foreign policy under George Bush is the kidnapping of the duly elected President of Haiti, Jean Bertrand Aristide, and the undermining of democracy. We now see the aftermath of that kidnapping and the hurricane and we now have a bloody nightmare on our hands based on U.S. foreign policy. Joining us for an update on the violence is our good friend and our special correspondent in Haiti, Kevin Pina. Kevin, welcome back to Flashpoints.

Pina: Thanks, Dennis, glad to be here.

Bernstein: Alright, bring us up to speed in terms of just what's been going on in terms of the violence of the last 48 hours, and then work your way back.

Pina: I actually want to start with last Thursday, which was September 30th, which was the thirteenth anniversary of the 1991 coup d'etat against Aristide during his first presidency. It was really clear that it was not business as usual in Port au Prince because normally, Lavalas had a permit to demonstrate that day, in order to commemorate the event, and normally at those events you always see a large contingent of police providing security, Haitian police. As well as United Nations vehicles, which regularly check the route, the approved negotiated route. On Thursday when this demonstration began they were conspicuously absent. No police presence, no United Nations presence and that told everyone immediately that something was drastically, dreadfully wrong.

What happened later is in the day, after demonstrators had passed the National Palace in Haiti, in the central plaza, down below at the Rue de Cassene [sp] close to the National Penitentiary, forces of the S.W.A.T team [of] the Haitian National Police opened fire on the unarmed demonstrators. It was as a response to the Haitian Police opening fire on the unarmed demonstrators that violence, this latest round of violence, broke out in Haiti. Since then, of course, we've heard about attacks against the police; we have heard the police are now rounding up en masse suspected Lavalas supporters, Aristide supporters. There are now paramilitary gangs that are reportedly working with the Haitian National Police, who are blocking major intersections in the capital after 6 P.M. every night. This has turned out to be a horrific, horrific nightmare. At the same time a lot of questions were raised about what exactly is the role of the so-called UN peacekeepers as they stood by and allowed the Haitian National Police to provoke this latest round of violence, again, by firing on unarmed demonstrators on September 30th.

Bernstein: We're speaking with Kevin Pina in Port au Prince where another horrific nightmare for the Haitian people is unfolding out of desperate U.S. foreign policy. Since the floods and the hurricane, it does appear that reactionary forces have attempted to kill, jail with further impunity the supporters of democracy and of President Aristide. What can you tell us about that?

Pina: Even before that, you've got to remember that the people who are battling the police right now are people who have been summarily arrested and detained without cause. A majority of the members of the popular communities such as Bel Air, LaSaline, Cite Soleil, have been, again, indiscriminately detained and arrested in police dragnets. Their leadership has been arrested: Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, Interior Minister Jocelerme Privert, So Anne the very famous folk singer, voodoo activist, who still remains in prison, who was arrested May 10th by U.S. Marines. And then of course horrendous massacres that occurred like March 12th in Bel Air, [and] May 18th in Bel Air. So these are a people who have been systematically experiencing a political witch hunt and repression and, again, political imprisonment, since the forced ouster of Jean Bertrand Aristide on February 29th.

So after September 30th, after police fired on unarmed demonstrators, that genie was let out of the bottle. All of that anger, all of that resentment that has been a result, again, of the systematic campaign to repress the majority political party in Haiti, which is Lavalas, Aristide's political party, which represents the majority of the poor. All of that repressed anger came to the surface after the Haitian police performed that action on September 30th. Now, of course, it's interesting that today the United Nations troops coordinated an attack on Bel Air this morning where they cordoned off the neighborhood. APV vehicles, armoured personnel vehicles manned by Brazilian troops, backed up by unidentified UN troops who had trained attack dogs there today; they detained more than 500 people who the so-called Minister of Justice in Haiti said were "gangsters." However, of the 500 they detained they arrested 75 of them, the remainder of them were let go, but out of all of those 500 people, not one single gun was found. So, everyone's asking themselves, 'where did the guns go'?

It's the same question with these so-called decapitations of the police in Haiti. They claim that Aristide supporters had decapitated three policemen, that their headless bodies were found. Well, the lawyer for one of the Lavalas leaders who was arrested last Saturday, he [Lavalas leader] had participated in a radio program Radio Caraibes FM. He, along with two other Lavalas representatives were arrested last Saturday; well, the lawyer for one of them, the Senate chairman Yvon Feuille, is now condemning the government and demanding that they show the bodies of these so-called three headless policemen. He said that the government itself has admitted that these purported headless bodies were not wearing police uniforms but they were wearing civilian clothes, yet no one has seen the actual bodies of these purported three

headless policemen. Yet this is something that is being used to justify right now the United Nations and the Haitian police performing joint actions in pro-Aristide slums such as they did this morning in Bel Air.

Bernstein: We know from your reporting on Flashpoints and in other alternative press outlets, the mainstream press here has not only been complicit and quiet, they've been cheerleaders for the death squads, for the coup, and for the kidnapping, and the kind of reporting we've seen. The ignorance of the reporting is clearly equivalent to what we are seeing around Palestine. Has that changed any? Is the reporting from the mainstream and places like NPR still allowing this kind of slaughter to continue?

Pina: Well AP has fed it by allowing this so-called human rights expert Jean Claude Bajeux so much airtime about this so-called "Operation Baghdad." If people in the streets are beginning to imitate and call it "Operation Baghdad" it's because news organizations like AP have allowed disreputable sources such as Jean Cluade Bajeux to have so much say in their news reporting. The other element that you've got to remember is that, for example, three Lavalas members were arrested on that radio program last Saturday; AP says that it is only pro-Aristide people who are condemning the arrests, well that's an absolute lie. The three Lavalas leaders who were, as I said, Senate Chairman Yvon Feuille, along with Senator Rudy Herivaux, and former deputy Gerard Gilles were on a program with opposition members. It was a roundtable forum which included the head of the Democratic Convergence Evans Paul as well as Himmler Rebu a former military officer. Both of them condemned the arrests of those three Lavalas leaders on Saturday as well, as well as Radio Caraibes suspended its broadcast for two days in protest saying the arrests at their radio station compromised their integrity as a news organization and [their] freedom of speech.

But AP has never once mentioned that in any of their reporting. Now AP has begrudgingly had to say that pro-Aristide supporters, they keep calling them pro-Aristide supporters, say that the violence was provoked when police fired on unarmed demonstrators. Well AP never mention that it wasn't only Aristide supporters who saw that, but it was also several members of the media who reported it here in Haiti and elsewhere. So AP is not telling the whole story. I believe that in a lot of instances they are giving a false impression by omission. It's what they've done consistently in Haiti and what they continue to do today.

Bernstein: And finally, I have to give you a crack at this, Kevin Pina. We are now hearing Secretary oif Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the whole administration saying flawed elections are better than no elections in Iraq and of course we're now hearing from Jimmy Carter that he's almost guaranteeing flawed elections again in the United States. And, of course you know that they came and got Aristide, kidnapped him and took him out of the country on a phony deal about flawed elections. I'm sure you didn't miss this.

Pina: Well no, not at all, and they keep talking about having elections next year again in Haiti. These are U.S. sponsored elections brought to you by the Bush administration, and the so-called 'international community' that supported the United States, which includes Canada, of course, and France, in the ouster of Aristide. Given, after this latest round of events, I just cannot see myself and many other observers how they can possibly ever hold elections given that the incontestable majority political party in Haiti has been so repressed, and is now facing, basically, a life and death struggle; there's no way they will participate in those elections and I don't see how they can be fair and credible without them.

Bernstein: Alright, Kevin Pina speaking to us from Port au Prince, Haiti in the aftermath of a Bush kidnapping of the President of that country, duly elected unlike the President of the United States - select - Bush. I want to thank you again Kevin Pina for your courage and good reporting; thanks for being with us on Flashpoints.

Pina: Thank-you Dennis, good night.