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By Ibon Villelabeitia

GONAIVES, Haiti (Reuters) - Haiti's new prime minister has flown into the chaotic city where an armed revolt began six weeks ago to hail as "freedom fighters" a ragtag gang that helped oust President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Arriving in a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter -- escorted by a second Black Hawk and a twin-rotor Chinook -- Gerard Latortue landed on a soccer field in Gonaives to a raucous welcome by about 2,000 people.

The 69-year-old economist, named by a council of Haitians to take over after Aristide was driven into exile on February 29 by the revolt and U.S. pressure, was handed a wooden key to the city as he set foot in his hometown.

In the United States, "they thought the people in Gonaives were thugs and bandits," Latortue told reporters in the impoverished Caribbean nation's fourth-largest city on Saturday. "But they are freedom fighters."

The rebels in Gonaives, most of whom belonged to a street gang called "the Cannibal Army" that once supported Aristide, did not lay their arms at Latortue's feet as promised.

But in a symbolic gesture, three rebel leaders, swapping their uniforms for smart suits and ties, turned in a dozen of old and dilapidated weapons wrapped in the Haitian national flag to Latortue during a private meeting.

The prime minister said their leaders again pledged to disarm when the time was right.

Rebel chief Guy Philippe, a former soldier and police commissioner in the reception committee, said his men could not disarm until public security was guaranteed.

"Today is a very important day for us. It officially marks the end of the hostilities," Philippe told Reuters.

"We want to hand in the guns but there is no police."

Latortue was driven through Gonaives -- a city that spawned a slave revolt that led to independence from France in 1804 -- in a tumultuous cavalcade. Thousands of people poured out of shacks to clap, chant and wave.

DEFEATING 'THE DICTATOR'

Mopeds and bicycles trailed the convoy, car horns blared and pigs and goats rooted through trash and dried sewage.

The two U.S. Army Black Hawks hovered overhead and French Legionnaires, who arrived in Gonaives Friday as a multinational U.N.-sanctioned force began to restore order beyond the capital, patrolled the outskirts of the city of 200,000.

The prime minister's security was provided by police and rebel street soldiers dressed in suits.

Latortue took the podium before thousands in the main square, thanked Gonaives for defeating "the dictator Aristide," and presented several members of his new Cabinet.

As he pointed to Interior Minister Herard Abraham, a former general who backs a rebel demand for the re-establishment of the Haitian army, people shouted, "Arrest Aristide."

Framed by a mural of Creole independence heroes, Latortue promised to build hospitals, highways and even a stadium and to bring drinkable water to the slum dwellers of Gonaives.

"Electricity too, we want telephones too," the crowd chanted back.

He also praised accused drug trafficker and former "Cannibal Army" boss, Amiot Metayer, who terrorised Gonaives when he enforced loyalty to Aristide.

Metayer was killed last September. His brother, gang leader Buter Metayer, has said the reason he began the revolt with an attack on Gonaives' police station February 5 was to avenge the execution-style killing of Amiot, which he blamed on Aristide.

Before the ceremony, Buter Metayer told Reuters his fight was over and he planned a holiday in the United States.

"I'm going to give him (Latortue) all the weapons we have in Gonaives," Metayer said.

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