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Haiti Rebels May Surrender Weapons

By: **STEVENSON JACOBS** (Sat, Mar/20/2004)

GONAIVES, Haiti - A key figure in the uprising against Jean-Bertrand Aristide said his rebels would surrender their weapons as Haiti's interim prime minister landed in a helicopter to cheers and clapping from hundreds of people on Saturday.

It is the first test of popularity for interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, who hopes to win support from rebels in his hometown of Gonaives, where a street gang began the popular rebellion that erupted Feb. 5 and overran Haiti in three weeks.

"We're very satisfied to see that the new government is here. I think (the rebels) deserve a place in the new government ... they deserve to continue to play a part," said Teimeille Eliecin, 37.

Rebels planned to hand over guns here during a public meeting with Latortue on Saturday, rebel leader Butteur Metayer told The Associated Press.

"We want to turn in all the guns we fought with," said Metayer, who declined to say if that meant they would keep any arms.

A Gonaives street gang began the armed rebellion that ultimately helped oust President Aristide, who fled Haiti on Feb. 29.

Aristide has said he was forced out by the United States, which denies it did anything but help save the embattled leader's life by arranging a flight to the Central African Republic. Aristide has since flown to the nearby island of Jamaica to be with his wife and children.

Several police were killed in a Feb. 5 gunbattle when rebels evicted police and burned the Gonaives station and other buildings, launching the uprising. An even bloodier battle raged two days later when 150 police tried to retake the city, but failed and lost about 30 officers.

"To make peace, the first thing we want to do is turn over our weapons. We are ready and willing," Metayer said, sipping a beer on the steps of his house, which was nearly destroyed in clashes with police.

Another Gonaives rebel leader, Winter Etienne, also said his followers would surrender their weapons.

Casually dressed in a blue polo shirt, denim shorts and black sandals, Metayer said he would get a licensed handgun for personal protection after handing over the weapons. He suggested other rebels might do the same.

Hours earlier, an armored convoy of about 150 French Legionnaires rolled into Gonaives, Latortue's hometown, and set up a base at Haiti's State University following a brief patrol of the city.

Another 200 French troops arrived in Cap-Haitien, the northern port of 500,000 that is Haiti's

second-largest city. No resistance was reported.

Their mission was to establish control in rebel-held northern Haiti and allow relief organizations to deliver food and medicines disrupted during the rebellion.

"If they are here for peace, it will be a good thing," Gonaives resident Chantal Romeus, 28, said as he sat on his bicycle watching French troops pass by. "The town will be back to normal with these guys here."

Metayer said he welcomed the French.

"From now on, the security of Gonaives will not be in my hands. We'll be able to get some rest and let the French do it," he said.

Men scraped black sludge from sewers and swept streets clean in preparation for Latortue's visit, his first since a new government was appointed this week. The trip was coordinated with French and American troops.

Rebels in both cities previously had said they would disarm only if pro-Aristide gunmen do the same - raising questions about the feasibility of Haiti's disarmament campaign, which is being assisted by foreign troops.

Troops say they're helping a government with scant resources to disarm gangs. But rebels can be seen in the capital and other towns patrolling with assault weapons.

U.S. forces continued to patrol the capital of Port-au-Prince and said they were planning to deploy to the south and east. Chilean troops replaced a U.S. Marine security detail at the international airport. Canada was sending more than 700 troops. Eventually, a U.N. peacekeeping force will take over.

Canada on Friday extradited Aristide's top security chief, Oriel Jean, 39, to the United States to face a drug trafficking charge. The move underscored Washington's claims that Aristide's administration was corrupted by drug trafficking.

Canadian Justice Department spokesman Patrick Charette said Jean's arrest warrant was based on a charge of conspiracy to import cocaine. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration says he could face proceedings in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Jean, who denies the charge, had his U.S. visa revoked last year. He had worked for Haiti's government for a dozen years.

Aristide, in turn, had accused the rebels of using drug proceeds to fund their uprising.

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