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### **Haiti: What of the Rule of Law?**

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New York, March 21, 2004 -- If Haiti is to rid itself of its destructive cycle of lawlessness and political upheavals, its leaders must resolutely break with the past to rapidly establish and promote respect for human rights and the rule of law. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the transitional government's priority.

Interim Prime Minister Gérard Latortue visited Gonaïves on March 20 to hail as freedom fighters the "cannibals," a group of thugs who took up arms against President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in order to settle scores with him. They blamed Mr. Aristide -- whom they once supported -- for the murder of their leader, Amiot Métayer. They have been in control of the city of Gonaïves since last December when they drove away the police and other governmental authorities.

Mr. Latortue was accompanied on this visit by Justice Minister Bernard Gousse and OAS Representative David Lee. But for all the hoopla that greeted this occasion, Mr. Latortue came away only with a hastily crafted wooden key to the city of Gonaïves. At the very least he succeeded in fanning the flames of lawlessness. The thugs refused to give up control of the municipality and to disarm. And they threatened to overthrow the interim government should they decide that things were not to their liking. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the Prime Minister was Jean Tatoune, a notorious lawbreaker with a nearly twenty-year long history of human rights crimes under his belt. Tatoune should have been in jail instead.

Prime Minister Latortue may have aimed for precious time, but he has sent the wrong signals to Haitians seeking durable peace and justice, closing perhaps quickly the window of support that Haiti enjoys among people of good will in domestic and international spheres.

We strongly condemn the unholy alliance which the interim government has struck with the Gonaïves rebels. We note that such unholy alliances, in place since 1994 when President Aristide returned from exile, have weakened rather than strengthened law enforcement and governmental authority. We note with alarm the apparent acquiescence of international community representatives to a wrong-headed strategy that among other things increases the risks to international peacekeepers.

We call on the transitional Haitian government to reverse course and state forthrightly that criminality and warlordism have no place in Haitian society, and to take the steps necessary to re-establish state authority. This includes an aggressive disarmament campaign with the active support of international peacekeepers and police forces. We call on Haiti's international allies to also disassociate themselves with thugs and to redouble efforts at peacebuilding by committing more troops and accelerating their deployment to the country.

Most importantly, a judicial system that treats every Haitian equally regardless of social, economic or political status is long overdue. Let its advent not be postponed any further.

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