

Haiti: Security Vacuum in the North

Numerous Journalists and Government Officials in Hiding

(Port-au-Prince, March 22, 2004) — French military forces must work with the Haitian National Police to quickly retake control of the Haiti's northern region, Human Rights Watch said today. A large number of journalists and government officials from the region have gone into hiding out of fear for their safety.

Two Human Rights Watch representatives just returned from an assessment mission to the north of Haiti, during which they interviewed several journalists and government officials who described their lack of security. One former official, parliamentary deputy Gabriel Ducatel of Port-Margot, was being illegally detained in Cap Haïtien by the so-called Armed Forces of the North (*Forces armées du Nord*).

"It's been three weeks since the Multinational Interim Force arrived in Haiti, but the rule of law has yet to be reestablished in the north," said Joanne Mariner, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Americas Division. "The French military forces based in Cap Haïtien, together with the Haitian police, need to extend their reach beyond the city and assert effective control over the rest of the region."

French military forces arrived in Cap Haïtien last week and now number a few hundred. Although they are regularly patrolling the city of Cap Haïtien, they have not yet brought security to neighboring towns and rural areas. Nor have they stopped insurgent forces in Cap Haïtien from carrying arms and holding prisoners.

The Haitian National Police based in the north are still in disarray. Human Rights Watch representatives interviewed Renan Etienne, the newly appointed police commissioner for the northern department (*Directeur départementale de la Police Nationale d'Haïti*), and learned that he was beginning his tenure with a corps of fewer than 50 police. He said that in normal times his department had a few hundred police.

The lack of a police presence is evident all over the north of Haiti. In Trou du Nord, a town located between Cap Haïtien and the Dominican border, an armed group that calls itself the Kosovo Army (*Armée Kosovo*) is acting as the de facto security force. When the two Human Rights Watch representatives visited the area on March 19, they found Sinais Ambroise, one of the town's deputy mayors (*troisième magistrat*), in illegal detention there.

The Kosovo Army consists of approximately 35 mostly young men from the town of Trou du Nord, assisted by about 14 former members of the Haitian military. The group claimed a loose cooperative relationship with the Armed Forces of the North, the rebel force led by Guy Philippe, but said that they weren't directly under Philippe's command.

In Cap Haïtien, the rebel forces had 16 prisoners in their custody as of Saturday. Among the prisoners that Human Rights Watch saw that day were former deputy Gabriel Ducatel, of the ESCAMP party, who represented the Borgne and Port-Margot district, and Augustin Joseph, an employee of the radio station Peasant Voice of Milo (*Radio voix paysanne Milot*).

The Human Rights Watch representatives also heard credible testimonies describing situations of great insecurity in the northern towns of Fort Liberté and St. Rafael.

Human Rights Watch also interviewed a number of radio journalists in Cap Haïtien, including journalists with *Radio Nationale*, who had gone into hiding. They described the lack of security and their resulting fears for their safety. These journalists gave Human Rights Watch the names of another dozen journalists who were said to be in hiding too.

The vast majority of political representatives from the Lavalas party are also in hiding: nearly all of the local mayors, *CASEKs* (a local post), and municipal officials linked to the party of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

“The new Haitian government should demand that the insurgent forces respect the rights of people associated with the former government,” said Mariner. “Journalists associated with all political tendencies must be allowed to work freely, without fear of attack.”

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