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News and opinions on situation in Haiti

25/03/04 Beyond Port-au-Prince: Haiti news round-up

by Charles Arthur for the Haiti Support Group

On 21 March, interim Prime Minister, Gerard Latortue, addressed a large crowd gathered at the Plaza of Independence, in the city of Gonaives. Latortue began by requesting a moment of silence for Amiot Metayer, the local leader who was assassinated – his followers charge on orders from Aristide – on 22 September 2003.

(Metayer was an Aristide supporter who human rights organisations and the Organisation of American States (OAS) had demanded be arrested for alleged involvement in the murder of a security guard, burnt to death when Aristide supporters set fire to properties belonging to leaders of opposition parties in Gonaives, on 17 December 2001. In 2002 he was arrested, but escaped from prison in August that year, together with Jean Tatoune, the former FRAPH chief who was serving a life sentence for his participation in a massacre of Aristide supporters in 1994. From the time of Metayer's assassination at the end of September 2003, Tatoune and Metayer's supporters led an armed uprising against the government in Gonaives.)

In his speech in Gonaives on 21 March, Latortue described the armed rebels as "freedom fighters". Rebel leaders, including the escaped murderer, Tatoune, sat on a platform alongside Latortue, OAS representative David Lee, and recently installed interim Justice minister, Bernard Gousse, and interim Interior minister, retired General Herard Abraham. David Lee told reporters that Latortue's visit to Gonaives symbolised "a return of authority." Asked how he felt about the praise for Amiot Metayer, Lee said, "We're trying to encourage reconciliation." Later the same day, rebel leader, Butuer Metayer, (brother of Amiot), who Latortue had earlier hailed as one of the "freedom fighters", told the Associated Press, "Our plan is to keep working with the government, (but) if the government cannot work with us, we will overthrow it."

In a 22 March Reuters report, Alex Dupuy, a respected Haitian commentator and sociology professor at Wesleyan University, USA, said, "What is alarming indeed is that rather than trying to reconcile the conflicting parties ... this government seems to be moving in exactly the opposite direction, making alliances with known criminals. The veil has been removed. What I see happening is the return to the unfinished agenda of 1991."

West Department

On 13 March, two men were shot dead by members of Guy Philippe's entourage in the village of Vialet. Guy Philippe, the military leader of the armed insurgents, was reportedly touring towns in the west and south, and had just left the town of Petit-Goâve. He and his men mistook the two men in Vialet for Lavalas Family supporters. Later that day, in Petit-Goâve, hostilities broke out between factions

within the MDN party (neo-Duvalierist party in the Democratic Convergence coalition). There was a machine gun attack on the residence of local MDN leader, Montigène Sincère. The attack was believed to be the result of rivalries, both for control over the town and for affiliation with Philippe's nascent administration. Sincère had organised Philippe's visit to Petit-Goâve.

The Haitian Press Agency (AHP) on 22 March reported that the police station in the town of Grand-Goâve is controlled by armed irregulars, who say their function is provide security for the local population. These men are led by Ti Nènè who had led an armed opposition group which briefly took control of the town in early February.

Meanwhile, in Port-au-Prince, the Haiti Press Network reported that the bodies of six young men were found in the streets of the Cité Militaire district of Delmas, on the morning of 21 March. According to eye-witnesses, the victims had been shot dead by police officers. An Associated Press photographer found three of the dead in a private morgue in La Saline, and took pictures, showing they had bags over their heads and hands tied behind their backs. On 15 March, Radio Caraïbes reported that the Lavalas Family mayor of Gonaïves, Taupa Moïse, had been kidnapped from a house in Port-au-Prince. The kidnappers demanded a US\$100,000 ransom.

South-East Department

On 22 March, Radio Signal FM reported that following Guy Philippe's visit to the town of Jacmel, former members of the demobilised Army, under the command of Arnel Bélizaire, had begun patrolling the streets. Bélizaire said he believed that a re-instated Army was an indispensable part of the new Haiti.

South Department

A Reuters article dated 23 March quoted reports sent to the United Nations by non-governmental organisations detailing public executions carried out by the irregular armed force that controls the city of Les Cayes. According to the UN's Elisabeth Byrs, each morning in the main square, the self-appointed security force shoots accused thieves in front of crowds of local people. "There is no trial," Byrs said.

Central Plateau

Joseph Jean-Baptiste, the leader of the irregular armed forces in the Central Plateau, and a former soldier closely connected to the MDN neo-Duvalierist party, has told local journalists that he favours working together within the national police to assure security for the population. According to Jean-Baptiste, who is based in the town of Hinche, the department had no need of any presence of the multinational force.

An AHP report, dated 24 March, states that former soldiers led by Joseph Jean-Baptiste have taken control of the police station in the town of Mirebalais. Jean-Baptiste and his men disarmed the official police officers and installed their own

'police force' under a new commander, a former soldier called Philippe.

North-East Department

On 23 March, the United Nations' Elisabeth Byrs told Reuters that most of Fort Liberté, the department capital, is the hands of escaped convicts. "The town is virtually deserted. There is no market. Many houses have been burned. Prisoners control most parts of the city," said Byrs.

In the border town of Ouanaminthe, irregular armed forces under the command of Jean Robert, aka Ovep, are in control. Robert was arrested by the Dominican authorities on 12 March in connection with his alleged involvement in the shooting dead of two Dominican border guards when armed insurgents crossed into Haiti at Dajabon on 14 February. In reprisal for the arrest, Robert's men took 10 Dominicans hostage and threatened to kill them. On 13 March, the Dominican authorities negotiated the simultaneous release of Robert and the hostages. On 15 March, Robert's men demonstrated their strength by stopping all traffic from crossing to the weekly market at Dajabon. Earlier, on 2 March, Robert's men had intervened on behalf of the Group M company to suppress strike action by workers at the Codevi free trade zone.

North Department

Since 22 February, the city of Cap-Haitien has been under the control of armed irregular forces. Rumours that some 20 Aristide supporters were imprisoned in a container or several days before it was dumped into the sea by the armed irregulars, have not yet been confirmed. In a French Press Agency report, dated 24 March, Commandant Xavier Pons of the French military force said his men had seen a dead body attached to a buoy floating in the Cap-Haitien bay. Two anonymous sources quoted in the same report said they had seen two other bodies in the sea to the north of Cap-Haitien. They said the people had been executed, tied to cement blocks and metal pieces, and then thrown into the sea. Now decomposed, the bodies has risen to the surface. In an Associated Press (AP) report dated 23 March, a resident named as Job Denis said, "The fishermen come in and say all they've seen are bodies."

In the same AP report, dated 23 March, it was stated that the commander of the irregular armed forces in Cap-Haitien is Louis-Jodel Chamblain, the former FRAPH leader and convicted murderer. He and his men have made their base in a top hotel. AP reported that when there is a problem, local businessmen – who have helped pay the rebels' bills for food and lodging – call on the armed irregulars and not the police. Chamblain apparently acts as a de facto judge in Cap-Haitien. He and his men have jailed dozens of people accused of everything from petty thievery to fighting for Aristide. Human Rights Watch reported that on 20 March the armed irregulars were illegally detaining at least 16 prisoners.

North-West Department

On 15 March, Father Burnet Cherisol of the organisation, Child Care Haiti, based in Mare Rouge, told a meeting in London, UK, that there had been violence in

Port-de-Paix, but not in the region around Mare Rouge. He added, however, that there had been a lot of threats of violence, mainly as a consequence of marauding gangs coming from the towns, trying to pillage and steal whatever they could take.

At the end of February, OxfamGB reported that on 24 February armed gangs took over the city of Port-de-Paix, and that subsequently all state vehicles (agriculture, health, police, justice, etc.) had been stolen, and that looting, fleecing, and private car thefts were carried out with complete impunity.

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