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Media Alert

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For Immediate Release: October 14, 2004

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Concern About the Arrest of the Reverend Gerard Jean-Juste

Human Rights First expresses grave concern about the safety of Reverend Gerard Jean-Juste, who was arrested on October 13, 2004, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and is currently in the custody of the Haitian government. Human Rights First urges the Haitian government to ensure that Reverend Gerard Jean-Juste is provided the due process of law and that he is treated humanely.

According to initial information received by Human Rights First, on Wednesday afternoon masked members of the Haitian National Police entered Sainte Claire Church where Rev. Jean-Juste was running a weekly soup kitchen for his parishioners in Port-au-Prince. The men arrested Rev. Jean-Juste and took him to the police station in Petionville. According to our reports, the police did not have a warrant and Rev. Jean-Juste has yet to be charged with any crime.

In an interview with reporters, Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue explained the arrest by saying that Jean-Juste's name has become "associated with" people suspected of organizing against the government. Rev. Jean-Juste's arrest comes on the heels of an upsurge of violence by both armed supporters of the current government and armed supporters of former President Aristide.

"We strongly urge that Rev. Jean-Juste be treated humanely by Haitian authorities" said Michael Posner. "He should not be held without formal charges. If the government of Haiti does not have sufficient evidence to prosecute him in a court of law," said Posner, "then he should be immediately released."

In the 1970s, Rev. Jean-Juste founded the Haitian Refugee Center in Miami, Florida. He served as its Executive Director for a number of years. While at the Haitian Refugee Center Rev. Jean-Juste worked closely with Human Rights First and others to assist those who fled Haiti during the Duvalier regime. "In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s Rev. Jean-Juste was a prominent and respected in the United States on behalf of Haitian refugees," said Michael Posner, Executive Director of Human Rights First.

Rev. Jean-Juste returned to Haiti in 1991 and became parish priest at the Sainte Claire Catholic Church. He was a vocal supporter of former President Aristide. Since Aristide's forced exile in February 2004, Rev. Jean-Juste has been outspoken in his criticism of human rights abuses carried out by armed forces with ties to the government.

HRF Letter to Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue