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Amnesty group assails new Haitian leadership

Amnesty International cites evidence of intimidation and rights abuses in Haiti, despite the presence of a multinational peacekeeping force.

BY MICHAEL A.W. OTTEY

PORT-AU-PRINCE -- Haiti is mired in human rights abuses, political vengeance and fear, some of it caused by the interim government, Amnesty International said on Wednesday.

Wrapping up a 15-day fact-finding mission, representatives of the human rights group said that the organization was "deeply concerned" for the safety of the country's civilian population.

Amnesty found evidence of intimidation and rights abuses across the political spectrum, despite the presence of a multinational peacekeeping force. But the group was pointedly critical of the interim government, led by Prime Minister Gerard Latortue.

"Since coming to power, the interim government has swiftly moved to arrest members of former President [Jean-Bertrand] Aristide's Lavalas Family party suspected of acts of political violence or corruption," said Yvonne Terlingen, Amnesty's representative to the United Nations. "However, it has failed to act against a number of known perpetrators of grave human rights violations."

Minister of Justice Bernard Gousse told The Herald on Tuesday that he disagrees with the assessment that the government is exclusively targeting Aristide loyalists.

Terlingen said convicted criminals being allowed to roam the streets freely include Louis Jodel Chamblain and Jean Pierre Baptiste, also known as Jean Tatoune.

"The delegation interviewed Haitians from across the political and social spectrum," Terlingen said. "All expressed a profound sense of insecurity and fear for their own safety from one or the other of the armed elements currently at large."

She said members of those armed elements include thugs, armed pro-Aristide gangs, nonpolitical armed gangs, ex-military authorities, former rural police chiefs responsible for past abuses and individuals who participated in the 1991 coup that removed Aristide.

"Amnesty International is particularly concerned for the safety of judges, prosecutors, criminal investigators, victims, witnesses and human rights defenders involved in prosecutions relating to past human rights abuses," she said.

She cited the case of Napela Saintil, the chief judge in the trial of individuals responsible for a 1994 massacre in the Raboteau slum of Gonaives. Chamblain, one of the leaders of the recent uprising that ousted Aristide, was convicted in absentia for his involvement in the massacre. He now moves freely in Cap Haitien.