

Want to send this story to another AOL member? Click on the heart at the top of this window.

INTERVIEW-Jailed Aristide aide denies Haiti massacre

By Simon Gardner and Joseph Guyler Delva

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, April 8 (Reuters) - Haiti's jailed former Interior Minister on Thursday denied he coordinated a massacre during a bloody revolt that toppled ex-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and said he was a scapegoat.

Yvescelme Privert, the first minister of Aristide's fallen government to be detained, is accused of organizing a massacre of political opponents in the city of Saint Marc, north of Port-au-Prince, as violence raged during the rebellion.

"It is political persecution. ... where is the proof? I have nothing to do with a massacre in Saint Marc," Privert told Reuters in an interview at his Port-au-Prince cell as U.S. Marines armed with M-16s looked on.

Killings were common during February's revolt. More than 200 people died in fighting between Aristide's supporters and foes.

But human rights organizations have not been able to verify reports in local media of a large-scale massacre of up to 50 people in Saint Marc, which has been taken as a fact by the new government.

Privert's arrest warrant does not say how many people were killed. Foreign reporters who visited Saint Marc after the suspected massacre found up to five bodies.

"I am a scapegoat," Privert said, calling on the international community to pay close attention to his eventual trial to ensure it is fair.

Members of exiled Aristide's Lavalas Family party say they are the target of a witch-hunt by rebels and the interim U.S.-backed government of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue.

The authorities have arrested more than a dozen of Aristide's associates on vague charges of "ill doing" and issued a blacklist banning dozens more from leaving the country pending investigations of suspected graft.

However it has made no effort to arrest armed rebels accused of rights abuses who continue to roam free, and many of whom are expected to be incorporated into the police.

CLEARING NAME

Privert, a technocrat who previously headed Haiti's tax agency and has his own small accounting firm, said he turned himself in on Tuesday after an arrest warrant was issued so he could challenge the allegations in court and clear his name.

"I have no home abroad, no bank account abroad. If I left the country, I would have to start from scratch," Privert said through the metal bars of his cell, wearing pajama bottoms and a bright orange T-shirt.

"If I had fled, (the allegations) might have seemed true. ... It was a risk to stay, and I am paying the price," he added, saying his wife and three children urged him to flee to the neighboring Dominican Republic.

Privert, 51, says he has not yet met the judge overseeing his case, and has not been allowed to leave his cell -- bare save for an old iron-framed bed, wooden table and chair.

"I am supposed to be allowed out of my cell for six hours a day," he said, fingering a copy of the prison rulebook, his only reading material apart from a copy of the constitution.

While he cannot sleep because it gets so hot at night and swarms with mosquitoes, at least he has plenty of space.

The National Penitentiary where he is locked up housed 1,900 inmates before the February uprising, but as happened across the country, prisoners escaped en masse as police fled before the advancing rebels.

The prison, the country's biggest, has 54 inmates at present.

./08/04 19:07 ET

Copyright 2003 Reuters Limited. All rights reserved. Republication or redistribution of Reuters content, including by framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Reuters. Reuters shall not be liable for any errors or delays in the content, or for any actions taken in reliance thereon. All active hyperlinks have been inserted by AOL.