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Gangsters Torch Cars in Haiti Capital

By AMY BRACKEN Associated Press Writer

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) - Young gangsters rampaged through the heart of the Haitian capital, torching cars and firing in the air in what many people feared was a prelude to more violence.

Friday marked 10 years since ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide returned to the Caribbean country from his first exile. His reinstatement by 20,000 U.S. troops ended three years of brutal military rule.

This time, Haiti is being shepherded by U.N. peacekeepers who took over from U.S. Marines who arrived Feb. 29, the day Aristide fled a revolt by ex-soldiers from the army that ousted him in 1991 and that he disbanded in 1995.

Heavily armed ex-soldiers based in Port-au-Prince said Thursday that reinforcements had been arriving from all over the country to help end two weeks of shootouts and beheadings in which at least 48 people have been killed.

"We are mobilizing, we have started working, carrying out the weapons inspections ourselves, addressing security problems in the city," former Maj. Remissainthe Ravix told Associated Press Television News. "We want to finish right now."

Just before sunset Thursday, the central neighborhood of Poste Marchard was besieged by men running through the streets, firing gunshots into the air and burning cars along the road, as drivers and pedestrians scattered.

A glassy-eyed man holding a bottle of rum stood across the road from an incinerated white Jeep: "That was my car," he said, just blocks from the National Palace guarded by U.N. peacekeepers in armored cars.

Earlier Thursday Aristide militants rampaged in the Delmas neighborhood, firing into the air and threatening people with machetes.

The ex-soldiers and Haiti's business leaders have accused U.N. peacekeepers sent to stabilize the country in June of being ineffective.

Haiti's Chamber of Commerce criticized a "flagrant paradox in the merciless struggle against terrorism of the great powers of the world and ... the surprising inadequacy of how international troops are deployed in Haiti."

With only 3,000 of the 8,000 troops promised, the Brazilian-led force is overstretched in this nation of 8 million, and ex-soldiers continue to hold sway over much of the countryside.

Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue said Thursday that elections planned next year are Haiti's only hope.

"We call on the citizens to join our movement, our effort to fight against terrorism, and also to continue our democratic process," Latortue told a news conference. "The only way we can all win is via elections."

The violence has disrupted a massive effort to feed storm survivors in the northwest city of Gonaives, where Tropical Storm Jeanne killed some 1,900 people and left another 900 missing and some 200,000 homeless.

The U.N. World Food Program's Anne Poulsen said 113 containers of relief food for Gonaives was blocked at Port-au-Prince port for lack of workers, and a road convoy was unable to leave Friday because peacekeepers assigned to escort it were busy patrolling the capital.

Roman Catholic Rev. Gerard Jean-Juste was detained at Saint Claire Church by a squad including masked officers on Wednesday, police said.

He is one of at least eight people missing, including pro-Aristide Senate President Yvon Feuille and ex-legislator Roudy Herivaux, were being held on suspicion of masterminding the violence.

Other Aristide allies behind bars include former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, who surrendered in June to face accusations he was linked to killings of opponents during the February rebellion.

Haiti's latest crisis erupted when Aristide supporters demonstrated Sept. 30 to demand his return from exile in South Africa and an end to "the occupation" by foreign troops. Police reportedly shot and killed two protesters, and the next day three police were found beheaded.

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