

Police terror sweeps across Haiti

UN looks on as slum-dwelling Aristide supporters are killed or thrown into jail without charge

Reed Lindsay in Port-au-Prince
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The bodies had been whisked away but the dried pool of blood covering the dirt-floor dead end of a twisting alley was a chilling sign of what happened here last week.

Residents in the National Fort district, which like most of Port-au-Prince's slums is a bastion of support for former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, gathered around the darkening blood the following day. Some, who were afraid to give their names, said policemen wearing black masks had shot and killed 12 people, then dragged their bodies away. At least three families have identified the bodies of relatives at the mortuary; others who have loved ones missing fear the worst.

'The police officers will say that this was an operation against gangs. But we are all innocent,' said Eliphete Joseph, a young man in a blue basketball jersey who claimed to be a friend of several of those killed, his eyes red with grief as he stood in the shadow of a crumbling concrete staircase. 'The worst thing is that Aristide is now in exile far from here in South Africa, but we are in Haiti, and they are persecuting us only because we live in a poor neighbourhood.'

A police spokesperson confirmed there had been a police raid at National Fort looking for gang leaders and that at least eight people were killed.

The killings appear to be the latest example of what human rights groups describe as a campaign of repression against suspected supporters of Aristide, who was escorted out of the country on 29 February by US Marines. The US government said he resigned. Aristide says he was forced out in a US-backed coup.

The current repression has led Haitian and international human rights observers to draw comparisons with the darkest days of the 1991-1994 military regime, and with the 1957-1986 dictatorship of François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc'. The difference, they say, is that the current government has had the blessing of the international community.

Neither the US nor the UN, which has a peacekeeping force here of more than 3,000 troops, has censured the abuses committed under the government of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, who took power in March. 'When 20 to 30 people were getting killed a year there was a cascade of condemnation pouring down on the Aristide government,' said Brian Concannon Jr, director of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti. 'Now that as many as 20 to 30 are getting killed in a day, there is silence... It is an obvious double standard.'

UN and government officials deny that security forces are murdering opponents. Observers concede it is difficult to record how many have been killed and by whom. There are many armed groups in Haiti, including gangs that support Aristide and others with shifting political allegiances. Meanwhile, heavily armed ex-members of the defunct military, a corrupt force disbanded by Aristide in 1995, swagger through the capital and control swaths of the countryside with tacit UN and government approval.

What is clear is that in recent weeks the government has gone on the offensive against members of Aristide's Lavalas party, searching homes and arresting people without warrants. Jails are full of suspected dissidents who have never seen a judge or been charged. The most publicised case is that of Gerard Jean-Juste, a Catholic

priest arrested on 13 October at a soup kitchen he runs for children. Justice Minister Bernard Gousse said on Thursday that Jean-Juste is suspected of hiding 'organisers of violence', and no warrant was required for his arrest. A long-time rights activist who set up an organisation in Florida to assist Haitian refugees, Jean-Juste was an Aristide supporter. He remains in the national penitentiary, where he has not seen a judge, say his lawyers.

Less than two weeks earlier, police burst into a Port-au-Prince radio station and arrested three former Lavalas party legislators who had appeared on a programme criticising the government. Human rights groups say hundreds more lower-profile Aristide supporters have also been jailed. 'We fought to bring democracy to Haiti, but since this government took over, it's been a dictatorship,' said Mario Joseph, a lawyer who worked to bring past human rights abusers to justice under Aristide and is now representing 54 people he says are political prisoners.

Gousse refused to grant The Observer permission to visit prisoners at the penitentiary, where only 21 of the nearly 1,000 inmates have been convicted of anything. The prison was emptied by armed groups led by former military officers after Aristide's departure, and Joseph believes the majority of the new prisoners are Lavalas members.

Government and UN officials defend the crackdown as an attempt to end the violence that has left dozens dead in the past three weeks. They accuse Aristide supporters of killing police and trying to destabilise the Latortue administration.

'What we have seen in this country during the last month or two has been a resurgence of brutal violence organised probably to provoke a process of political destabilisation,' said Juan Gabriel Valdes, who heads the UN Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (Minustah). 'Any state has the right to defend itself. We were sent by the United Nations to help and assist a government, and this task was given to us by the security council of the United Nations.'

Evidence of such 'destabilisation' is scant. Shootings and robberies have become common in central Port-au-Prince, but it is not always clear whether they are politically motivated or the result of crime sparked by desperate economic conditions and an ineffectual police force. Gousse said he knew of only two lootings, and that police officers had only been killed while carrying out raids in slums.

In recent weeks, media attention has focused on the killing and decapitation of two policemen, described as part of 'Operation Baghdad'. But the government has presented no evidence that the decapitations were carried out by Aristide supporters, nor that any such operation exists. According to Guyler C. Delva, head of the Haitian Journalists Association, the term 'Operation Baghdad' was coined by Latortue.

Aristide's backers have suffered the brunt of human rights violations since the change in government, said Gerardo Ducos, who is leading an observation mission for Amnesty International. 'They are persecuting the Aristide people because they are afraid of them,' said lawyer Reynold Georges, leader of a party opposed to Aristide, who is representing Jean-Juste and several other jailed Lavalas party members. 'A lot of people have stayed loyal to Lavalas. Believe it or not, it's true. The poor people, the masses, still believe in Aristide.'