

# **Report of the Haiti Accompaniment Project June 29-July 9, 2004**

**Written by Laura Flynn, Robert Roth and Leslie Fleming**

From June 29 to July 9, the Haiti Accompaniment Project sent a delegation to Haiti to investigate the current human rights situation and to assess the needs and practical possibilities for accompaniment of Haitian grassroots organizations by international solidarity workers. Our trip coincided with a new wave of repression by the de facto Haitian authorities against supporters of the elected government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the Fanmi Lavalas Party. Marked most dramatically by the arrest of Prime Minister Yvon Neptune two days before we arrived, this wave also included arrests of less well-known Lavalas activists. The level of tension in Port-au-Prince was heightened by two large fires in the downtown area on June 22 and again on July 3. The fires, apparently arsons, were of unknown origin, but Haitian authorities quickly claimed they were set by the Lavalas sector to destabilize the de facto regime.

We focused our work primarily in Port-au-Prince, although two members of our group traveled to Cap Haitian and Milot in the North. Our group visited two prisons in Port-au-Prince. We met with Prime Minister Yvon Neptune who maintained that his arrest is purely political, and gave us his version of February's events in St. Marc (see below). We also spoke with Annette Auguste (So Anne) at the Petionville jail. We visited the city hospital in Port-au-Prince, met with Lavalas activists and elected officials (many of them in hiding), religious and labor leaders, a women's victims group and human rights workers. We observed a peaceful sit-in in front of the US Embassy calling for the return of President Aristide. We met with dozens of victims of the recent coup and took their testimony. We also interviewed Mayor Moise Jean-Charles of Milot, and had meetings with the United Nation's Military Command in Cap-Haitian, as well as with the United Nations Human Rights Officer in Port-au-Prince.

One of the most striking findings from our trip was that despite stepped up repression, many groups in Port-au-Prince and in other parts of the country were preparing for ongoing long-term mobilizations to call for the return of democracy to Haiti. In this light, every group we met with pointed out the urgent need for independent human rights monitoring, and explicitly asked for the accompaniment of foreign observers whose presence might ensure safety as they attempt to exercise their rights to assembly and free speech.

In view of Haiti's current climate of repression, we have withheld the names of many of the people who volunteered their testimony to our delegation.

## **Overall Situation: The Coup and Its Aftermath**

From our discussions with human rights workers there was widespread agreement that the repercussions from this coup are even worse than what took place after the brutal 1991-1994 coup. There are many similarities between the two periods. In both instances military force, backed by Haitian elites, overthrew a democratically elected government. In both cases, there were large-scale, politically-motivated murders and assassinations. In both cases, paramilitary groups allied with the de facto authorities controlled areas, exercised police, judicial and administrative powers, and brutally repressed dissent. In both periods, people associated with the overthrown government lost jobs, had their homes burned, and were forced to leave their communities and families. In both periods, the de facto government routinely arrested democracy activists and held them without charge and without respect for their legal rights. Yet there are some important differences.

In 1991-1994, independent human rights groups continued to operate within Haiti and had some access to human rights groups around the world. Independent media, at times, was able to project the voice of victims of military rule. International organizations like the UN and OAS invoked their charter mechanisms in support of democracy, insisted on the legitimacy of Haiti's elected government, and isolated the de facto authorities.

In the current period, even though the overwhelming majority of Haiti's electorate voted for President Aristide and Lavalas representatives, their voice has been silenced. The Haitian media, mostly controlled by the Haitian elite, has been a consistent voice of the opponents of President Aristide. Most of the radio stations in the country are members of the Association of National Media of Haiti, which is itself a member of the Group of 184, which helped orchestrate the coup d'etat. This means that these stations are not merely biased in their news coverage; in fact, they publicly committed themselves to the overthrow of Haiti's democratic government.

Outside of Haiti, the US and France have dissuaded the UN and the OAS from even investigating the coup, despite requests from half of the OAS membership, and a third of the UN. The international media has largely ignored the massive human rights violations since the coup.

The United States and France have been able to construct a multilateral occupation of Haiti under the aegis of the United Nations. Brazilian troops now patrol Port-au-Prince, while Chilean troops are in command in the North. While this does nothing to change the illegality of the occupation, it gives it an aura of legitimacy. From all reports we have received, the UN Military Command works in close coordination with the Haitian National Police, which has already integrated many former military into their ranks. While sending thousands of troops to Haiti, the United Nations has so far sent only one human rights officer to Haiti; he must receive permission from the post-coup Justice Minister, Bernard Gousse, before he is able to visit a prison.

In the period following both coups, many independent human rights workers were threatened and forced underground, while some human rights groups placed their reputations at the service of the dictatorship. In 1991, Jean-Jacques Honorat of the human rights group CHANDEL, became the Cedras military regime's de facto Prime Minister. In 2004, groups like the National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR) and the Comite des Avocats pour le Respect des Libertes Individuelles (CARLI) helped develop support for the coup with exaggerated reports of human rights violations by supporters of the elected government. At the same time, they downplayed or denied the much more massive violations of the de facto regime and its paramilitary allies. Both groups continue to "denounce" supporters of the elected government that they claim were involved in human rights violations. Although these denunciations are not accompanied by proof, they are often accompanied by illegal arrest, incarceration and sometimes the disappearance of the accused. Both NCHR and CARLI are supported by USAID, and CARLI is a member of the Group of 184. They are not independent human rights groups.

We met with members of Foundation 30 September, a victim's organization which had been pressing for justice for victims of the 1991-1994 coup. They were deeply dismayed that the outside world still looked upon NCHR as a credible independent voice. They told us that NCHR was now working hand-in-hand with the post-coup Minister of Justice in carrying out illegal arrests and detentions. In several cases, including that of Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, NCHR staff have made accusations without evidence that have led to arrests of Lavalas officials.

## **Repression**

Through numerous conversations and testimony, we have reached the following conclusions:

- 1) In the North and Central Plateau regions, there is evidence that the former "rebels" and paramilitaries continue to wield de facto authority. There are numerous reports that the UN military command in the North coordinates its activities with Guy Philippe, the rebel leader who is responsible for major human rights violations – including assassinations – in the period preceding the coup.
- 2) There are multiple reports that former soldiers are now being integrated into the police in Port-au-Prince and throughout the country, bypassing normal police procedures for recruitment and training. While we were in Haiti, the de facto Minister of the Interior, the former general Herard Abraham, issued a public call for all former military living overseas to submit their files to the Ministry of Interior for consideration. Under the Haitian Constitution, the Ministry of the Interior is not afforded oversight of the police, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice.
- 3) In the period leading up to the coup and in the period immediately following, there were large-scale killings and the systematic burning of the homes of people identified as members or supporters of Fanmi Lavalas. The cities of Petit Goave, Gonaives, and Cap-Haitien have been particularly hard hit by the violence.

Thousands of supporters of President Aristide and Lavalas are currently in hiding throughout the country. Many people have been separated from their families and report having no fixed locations to sleep at night. Many have lost their means of economic survival and have no assistance that will allow them to restart their lives.

4) Approximately 10,000 state employees have been fired from their jobs. We received first-hand accounts of rank-and-file employees being told that the reason for their termination was their association with the Lavalas movement. In addition, thousands of democratically elected officials have been effectively removed from office. There are also accounts of employees in privately-owned businesses losing employment because of their known or suspected affiliation with Lavalas.

5) Impunity continues in Haiti. Convicted murderer Jean Tatoune is still free in the Gonaives area. Guy Philippe works out of a compound in Cap-Haitien. Despite his highly-publicized arrest in April, there are direct eyewitness reports that Louis-Jodel Chamblain, former leader of the terrorist group FRAPH, receives special privileges in prison while awaiting trial. For example, we heard from two people who saw him sitting with prison officials near the front entrance of the prison, looking over identifications of people visiting political prisoner Annette Auguste (So Anne). Minister of Justice Gousse has publicly declared that Chamblain has nothing to fear from the Haitian justice system.

6) Detention without charge or legal proceedings is now systematic in Haiti. The prisons are overcrowded with Lavalas activists who have been arrested without warrants in neighborhood sweeps and are held without charges. We heard reports that prison conditions in Les Cayes are so bad that epidemics have broken out. At least a dozen juveniles are being detained at the Delmas 33 prison in Port-au-Prince.

7) Threats continue against political activists. We have received numerous credible reports of lists of names being read on the radio and of anti-Aristide leaders calling for "removal" of Lavalas members in Cite Soleil and Gonaives. Key media outlets have played a significant role in this campaign of intimidation. For example, in early June the Haitian authorities placed a wanted poster with the photographs of 37 young men in *Le Nouvelliste*. There are reports that at least one of these individuals has since been killed.

8) There has been a series of targeted high-profile political arrests and home invasions. The arrests and imprisonment of Annette Auguste, Minister of the Interior Jocelerme Privert and Prime Minister Yvon Neptune are among a growing list, pointing to a politicized use of the criminal justice system. The French and UN assault on the home of the Mayor of Milot – without a warrant – is another case in point.

9) While politically-targeted arrests appear systematic, the overall security situation is also grave. During the coup period, "rebels" broke into jails and freed 3000 prisoners, among them many convicted human rights violators. There has now been a sharp increase in kidnappings and carjackings, affecting all sectors of society. We received numerous complaints that police authorities were doing little about crime, but instead were focused on arresting Lavalas supporters

## **Economic Attacks**

We observed or heard reports of a number of public actions by the current Haitian authorities that are clear evidence of an economic campaign against the poor.

- 1) While we were in Haiti the new, unelected Mayor of Delmas was attempting to forcibly remove from the main boulevard of Delmas hundreds of street vendors who make their living selling goods on the street.
- 2) Peasant farmers in the Artibonite Valley reported that large land owners accompanied by armed paramilitaries have seized land that was given to peasant families as a part of the Land Reform projects carried out by the Preval and Aristide administrations (300 hectares had been distributed to 6000 families). These actions came immediately after de facto Prime Minister Gerard Latortue criticized the Lavalas land reform program in Jacmel.
- 3) The government has dropped subsidies on fertilizer, critical to the rice industry in the Artibonite. Peasant farmers are reporting price gouging by wealthy importers. Since the coup, the price of a bag of fertilizer has gone from 290 gourdes to 650 gourdes.
- 4) Residents of Village 2004, a public housing project, have been evicted from their homes. The most egregious example is in a new four-story apartment complex in Village 2004. Housing in this complex was for state workers who had signed and begun to pay off 20-year mortgages with the state-owned bank. The UN seized this complex to house its personnel, and the residents were put out on the street, whether or not they had title to their homes.
- 5) There has been a crackdown on labor unions and peasant associations. We met with peasant organizers who told us of cooperatives being ransacked, with tools and equipment stolen. One organizer told us of repeated death threats and an assassination plot against him in late May. We met with a labor union organizer who told us of a steadily mounting anti-union campaign directed at the assembly sector. He has received many reports from workers who say that factory owners are not respecting the minimum wage, which was raised last year by the Aristide government. In addition, three hundred workers have been fired from a Grupo M factory in the free trade zone along the Dominican border.
- 6) On July 13<sup>th</sup>, shortly after we left Haiti, the Latortue government announced that it would be offering a tax holiday of up to three years to large businesses who suffered losses between December 2003 and March 2004. No state support was offered to the thousands of poor people who have lost their homes or livelihoods due to the coup d'etat.

- 7) We met with educators who told us that the government had cancelled subsidies for school children and schoolbooks and had ended funding for literacy programs. They expressed concern that many more families would be unable to send their students to school when the new term opens in the fall. There are also many people who report that their children have been forced out of school because of family affiliation with Lavalas.

## **Political Organizing**

### **Demonstrations/Protest**

In spite of the repressive conditions, political organizing among the poor continues in Haiti. Activists have attempted to carve out a space – however fragile – to continue their political protests and community work.

Demonstrations calling for the return of President Aristide continue. While we were in Haiti, there was a “sit-in” of approximately 100 activists in front of the US Embassy organized by Fanmi Lavalas. Shortly after we left Haiti, thousands of people marched from the neighborhood of Belair in Port-au-Prince to celebrate President Aristide’s 51<sup>st</sup> birthday and to call for his return. Lavalas organizers are well aware that a previous demonstration in May was met by police fire, causing some deaths. Still they are determined to maintain an open organizing presence for Lavalas. They have announced plans to continue this sit-ins on a regular basis in front of the Embassy.

The human rights organization, Foundation 30 September, has resumed its weekly vigil in front of the National Palace. Inspired by Argentina’s Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the organization held sit-ins every Wednesday from fall 1996 until this February, to insist on justice for the victims of the 1991-1994 dictatorship. They have changed their focus to insist on the restoration of democracy, as they believe the current government has no intention of pursuing justice. Weekly demonstrations also continue to protest the imprisonment of Lavalas activist and singer Annette Auguste.

### **Social Activism**

Social activism continues as well in this period, even though state funding for many projects has been cut off. We met with peasant organizers, educational activists, churches and labor organizers who are determined to continue their work, even though many have received threats.

### **Fanmi Lavalas**

Fanmi Lavalas has experienced the brunt of repression since the coup. Many leaders have left the country or are in internal exile. Many Lavalas members and supporters have had their homes burned, have lost jobs, and have been separated from their families. Activists from around the country face continual threats from police, the former military, and political opponents. The Justice Ministry has ordered personal and organizational

bank accounts to be frozen, rumors continually circulate about impending trials for corruption, and many former officials have been barred from leaving the country, in violation of the constitution. The National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR), which has positioned itself among international media as the voice of human rights in Haiti, has refused to condemn this widespread repression against Lavalas.

Faced with this situation, members of Lavalas who we interviewed project a long-term fight to restore democracy in Haiti. Grassroots leaders have emerged to sustain the work. They meet regularly and continue to demand the return of President Aristide as a prerequisite for any solution in Haiti. They have rejected participation in a new electoral commission and have denounced the continuing repression. They are currently readying for a massive, peaceful protest on July 28 to demonstrate their continued popular support.

### **Cap-Haitian/Milot**

Our group went to Cap-Haitian where we met with the Chilean military officers in charge of the UN military command and interviewed the Mayor of Milot, Moise Jean-Charles, and other victims of repression in the North.

In the period immediately preceding the coup, many human rights violations were committed, including the following:

- Rebel forces under the command of Guy Philippe murdered three police officers in Cap-Haitian on February 22. They also destroyed the airport and the prison, and burned the homes of many members of the local government.
- Throughout late February and early March there were nightly killings and home burnings. We received reports of some Lavalas supporters being burned alive in St. Marc.
- On February 22, there was large-scale violence in Milot. The mayor's car was burned and he received death threats.

No one has been prosecuted for any of these crimes. Guy Philippe and his men continue to function unimpeded out of a compound in Cap-Haitian. It is widely believed that he is in direct touch with UN military commanders and is consulted about arrests and other police matters.

Since the coup, the human rights situation in the North has remained grim. Chefs de Section (rural police officials who had been removed from positions of authority under the Aristide government) are now back in Milot and many other rural areas. This has created fear among peasants who remember the arbitrary justice these officials meted out in the past. In addition, the climate of repression in the North has been heightened by the French-UN invasion of Mayor Moise's house on June 14<sup>th</sup>.

According to Mayor Moise, his home was ransacked and his wife was arrested while his two young children watched. This invasion took place without a warrant. Recently, the Justice of the Peace in Cap-Haitian gave Mr. Moise's lawyer an affidavit stating that there was no outstanding warrant for his arrest. But there has been no apology or restitution for the damage done in the home invasion.

We met with the Chilean UN Military Command on Monday, July 5<sup>th</sup>. The meeting began politely, but the Chilean command became confrontational when we raised issues about the attack on Mayor Moise's home. A Chilean soldier appeared with a camera and took our pictures. At one point, the commander demanded to know why we were taking notes.

The commanding officer (Carrasco) stated that he had no knowledge of the incident at Mr. Moise's home, since he had just recently arrived in Cap-Haitian. He emphasized that the role of the United Nations Military Command was to support the Haitian police. Another officer (Hagedorn) had been in Cap-Haitian for a longer period of time. He acknowledged that Chilean troops did participate in the operation against Mr. Moise. He denied, however, that Mr. Moise's wife had been detained or that the home was ransacked. He dismissed eyewitness accounts of the attack and stated that this was not a "big issue" and that, at most, a few dishes had been inadvertently broken during the assault. He said that a UN investigation had determined that nothing illegal had occurred during the operation. He could not explain why Mr. Moise's house had been targeted.

There are plans for a series of peaceful protests in the area of Cap-Haitian and Milot from August 10 – August 14. This will include a Caravan of Justice, where people will go throughout the area and place candles at the sites of human rights violations. It will conclude with a march on August 14<sup>th</sup>, commemorating the beginning of the Haitian Revolution. Organizers emphasized the peaceful nature of these protests. They have asked for an international presence in the area at this time to help protect participants. We believe that it is a high priority to monitor the response of the UN Military Command and Haitian authorities to this exercise of democratic rights.

## **A Literal Witch-Hunt**

Members of Fanmi Lavalas have been using the word witch-hunt to describe the ongoing repression of Lavalas in Haiti. We were shocked to find that this term can be taken literally. While we were in Haiti, a wild story was being circulated by the media and Haitian authorities. It claimed that a baby was sacrificed during a ceremony attended by many members of Lavalas in the year 2000. While we initially took this to be at the level of tabloid sensationalism, it became clear that this ludicrous charge is being pursued by the current de facto authorities.

On three occasions individuals have gone on National Television, reportedly at the behest of the Minister of Justice, to describe their participation at this so-called ceremony. Despite the fact that the stories told by these individuals are not even consistent, (one person claimed the ceremony was held at President Aristide's house, another claimed it



was at the home of Lavalas activist Annette Auguste (SoAnne), Haitian authorities are using these out of court, unverified statements as the basis for issuing arrest warrants for Lavalas officials. These charges are also the justification for continuing to hold Annette Auguste.

## **Political Prisoners**

### **Annette Auguste (So Anne)**

Annette Auguste (So Anne) is a well-known singer and Lavalas activist. She is sixty years old. According to her husband, Wilfred Lavaud, at the time of her arrest she was recovering from an operation and was under doctor's orders not to leave the house. On May 10, 20 U.S. marines invaded her home and arrested her. The Marines did not have a warrant, as the Constitution requires, and the operation was implemented in the middle of the night, which is also illegal. During the arrest, eleven other Haitians, including children, were hooded and threatened. After questioning Auguste and all her family members, the Marines turned her over to the Haitian police.

Ms. Auguste has faced a bewildering series of shifting charges, none of them legally documented. First she was accused of planning attacks against U.S. Marines. Shortly after her arrest, NCHR made public statements indicating that they had evidence that Auguste was involved in the events of December 5 2003 at the National University in which the rector of the university was injured. On May 13, Auguste was taken before a judge who stated that there was no evidence for those charges. Still the prosecutor (Commissaire du Gouvernement) refused to sign her release, stating that "more charges were coming." According to Auguste's husband, she is now being held in relation to the alleged ceremony, although it is unclear if there was any written complaint to justify this. We asked him when he thought his wife would be released. He replied, "Whenever they decide to release her."

We met with So Anne in the overcrowded visiting area of the Petionville jail. Surrounded by 50 or more supporters, So Anne spoke with us about her arrest and the current situation in Haiti. She sees her arrest as political, aimed at discouraging protest and dissent in Haiti. She points out that she was arrested in the days preceding the mass mobilization on May 18<sup>th</sup>, when the Latortue government unleashed a wave of repression designed to intimidate people from openly demonstrating support for President Aristide. So Anne stated, "They're doing this to me because I am an organizer and I stand with the people. They know that we can bring millions into the streets and they want to prevent us from doing that."

### **Prime Minister Yvon Neptune**

On June 28, Haiti's constitutionally designated Prime Minister, Yvon Neptune, turned himself into authorities in Port-au-Prince after learning that there was a warrant for his arrest. De facto authorities have charged him with masterminding a "massacre" in St.

Marc during the violent period preceding the February 29 coup d'etat. As of our visit on July 8, Neptune had not yet seen a judge in the St. Marc case, despite the Constitutional requirement that arrestees be brought before a judge within 48 hours. Neptune has been questioned about other matters in other jurisdictions, but there is no legal justification for his detention in his case file.

As in the case of Annette Auguste, NCHR appears to have played a pivotal role in the arrest of the Prime Minister. NCHR was the first to claim that 50 people were killed in a "massacre" in St. Marc in February. At that time journalists and human rights workers went to St. Marc and found that, in fact, five or six people had died. The exact circumstances of their deaths were unclear, but were most likely due to a clash between two rival groups, Bale Wouze and Ramicos. They did not find the remains of 50 people. Pierre Esperance, the NCHR director in Haiti, publicly stated that the bodies, including the bones, had been eaten by dogs. He has since backtracked on this statement, now claiming that the bodies are hidden.

The *Agence Haitien de Presse* reported on July 8 that a source close to the de facto government had privately expressed frustration with NCHR. According to this source, the de facto government blames NCHR for embarrassing the government by pushing for Neptune's arrest and then being unable to substantiate the charges.

Two members of our delegation visited Prime Minister Neptune in his cell at the National Penitentiary on July 8. While we were not able to bring cameras or recording devices into the prison, we were able to take extensive notes during a 90-minute interview. Mr. Neptune was calm, articulate and dignified as he described the circumstances surrounding his case. He felt that he had good legal representation, but insisted that the case would be decided politically, not legally, since there is no legal basis to hold him. He considers himself a political prisoner.

**Prime Minister Neptune gave us the following testimony:**

"As for the charges against me, there is no legal case. This is simply a political case and it will be resolved politically. But here is the story.

In St. Marc there were two rival groups, *Bale Wouze* and *Ramicos*. *Ramicos*, an opposition group, had attacked radio stations and other state institutions. The police force was trying to calm things, but there was a high level of violence. I went to St. Marc after armed gangs began attacking precincts in the North. Gonaives was now under the control of these gangs. There was a threat that St. Marc would now be attacked as well.

The government sent monitoring agents up to St. Marc to assess the situation. When they left, the precinct was ransacked and burned. Measures were taken for special agents to go back to St. Marc. President Aristide asked me to visit St. Marc in order to assure the populace that the precinct was under government control. I visited the precinct, saw the damage, checked with police, looked for

generators and other resources, and noted that the threat from Gonaives should be looked at seriously.

The leader of *Bale Wouze* was brought to see me, along with two mayors from the St. Marc area. I saw them and explained to them that the priority was the defense of Gonaives, not rivalry within St. Marc. I urged reconciliation and defusing of tensions between *Bale Wouze* and *Ramicos*. One mayor said that he had good relations with *Ramicos* and he thought the effort at reconciliation would be effective.

When I left I told reporters outside – in English – that ‘the precinct is under control’ and I called for the populace in St. Marc to work together with the police to maintain calm.

They have the videotape. Anyone can see and hear what I said.

Then I left and went to Grande Goave. St. Marc was now out of my mind. I had too many other crisis points to focus on – and I thought the situation had stabilized. A day later I received a call from one of the mayors. He had talked to one of the *Ramicos* leaders who was also a deputy and a colleague, was told there was no problem. The mayor said, ‘We’re now working together.’ I was told that the precinct was well-protected. This put my mind at ease about the situation. The next day, a violent clash exploded in St. Marc. And now they are calling me the mastermind of a mass murder. But they have no case – and the charge is simply a political one.”

### **Attacks Against the Aristide Foundation for Democracy**

The de facto authorities have clearly targeted progressive social and economic projects connected to the Aristide government or the Lavalas movement. The campaign against the Aristide Foundation for Democracy is a case in point. We visited the site of the Foundation on two separate occasions. Most of the large-scale activities of the Foundation which operated before the coup (literacy programs, a large community store, a TV and Radio station for children etc.) have been halted by the de facto government. The majority of the staff of the Foundation have been forced to flee the country. There are continued threats against the Foundation and its staff. The government has illegally frozen the bank accounts of the Foundation and of its sister organization, Lafanmi Selavi. The Foundation and Lafanmi Selavi are unable to pay salaries owed to its staff or to resume activities. The free clinic at Lafanmi Selavi, which provided desperately needed health care to populations at need, remains closed. While we were in Haiti we learned that the government had gone a step further, freezing the personal bank accounts of individuals who worked for the Foundation and for Lafanmi Selavi.

The Foundation also launched the University of Tabarre in 2001. For two years medical students attended classes at the Foundation. Last fall a new campus for the medical school, at a separate site, was inaugurated. The school hosted 247 talented students, most

from poor families in rural areas, all of whom committed to work in under-served, poverty-stricken communities after graduation. The program was designed to break the pattern of only relatively wealthy Haitians being able to afford medical school, and of doctors being concentrated in wealthy urban areas. This has left most poor communities without a doctor. There are fewer than 2000 doctors in all of Haiti, and more than 90% of them practice in the capital, Port-au-Prince.

In early March the U.S. Marines appropriated the medical school campus for use as a military base, bringing the education of 247 young Haitian doctors to a halt. We learned while in Haiti that the Marines have now handed the campus over to the Brazilian troops who are leading the UN Mission.

*Radio Timoun* and *TeleTimoun* (a children's radio and TV station owned and operated by the Foundation) did resume broadcasting for a period in April and early May. On May 18, armed police entered the premises of the Foundation and closed both the TV and radio stations. They placed a seal on the doors of both stations, which states they cannot be opened. A Haitian lawyer with whom we met said that the closure was on orders from the Ministry of Education, which has no authority over a private radio and TV station, and no legal authority in any case.

Nevertheless, the Aristide Foundation continues to be a vital organizing space. It is one of the few public venues where activists are able to meet and plan peaceful protests. While we were in Haiti, reports circulated of threats to attack meetings there. An anti-Aristide student group issued a statement denouncing the meetings at the Aristide Foundation. We view these statements with deep concern and feel that this space is in urgent need of international monitoring and accompaniment.

### **Former Lafanmi Selavi Resident Held for Three Months**

We met with a former resident of Lafanmi Selavi, the home for street children that was founded by President Aristide while he was a parish priest in the late 1980s. This young man was also a journalist for Radio Timoun. He was arrested by the police in March at Lafanmi Selavi. There was no warrant for his arrest, though the police claimed he was stealing a generator from Lafanmi Selavi. He maintains that he was on the site in an attempt to prevent the center from being looted. After his arrest, armed individuals did loot the center, which at that time housed a large clinic for the poor.

He described his treatment and conditions at the National Penitentiary. He reported that during frequent interrogations he was taunted about his participation in Lavalas and threatened with physical punishment because of his activism. He further stated that drinking water for prisoners was their own previously used bath water, and that prison cells were so crowded that it was impossible for everyone to lie down at night. People slept in shifts or sitting up or standing propped against a wall.

He was eventually taken before a judge who ordered him released, as there was no evidence for the case. The prosecutor (Commissaire de Gouvernement) refused to sign the

paper for his release, claiming that he was a *chimere* and a gang leader. He pointed out to us that at the time of the coup he was a high school student, that he maintained good grades and that last year he had passed the first stage of the Baccalaureate exam (Rheto). This June he was to have taken the second stage of the exam and graduate from high school, a rare achievement for a former street child. His imprisonment meant that he lost this school year.

In June a foreign journalist who knew the young man from Radyo Timoun visited him in prison. After this visit his treatment improved, presumably because prison authorities took note that an international was interested in his case. Later in June, an international activist working with a Haitian attorney took up his case, and after a week of diligent, constant pressure they were able to get the various signatures needed and the young man was finally released.

### **Coordination des Femmes Victimes d'Haiti (COFEVIH)**

We met with six representatives of the *Coordination des Femmes Victimes d'Haiti* (COFEVIH), a group which brings together seven different women's organizations from Port-au-Prince's poorest neighborhoods. All women in COFEVIH were victims of rape or other forms of violence during the 1991-94 coup period. The women told us that when Aristide became president in 2000, they were given material assistance for organizing and were encouraged to speak without shame about their rapes. As well, the organization received material assistance from the government for commercial projects (selling soap, jelly, and dresses). A representative commented, "Aristide informed us about our rights as women and we felt safe to come and go as we wanted."

The women informed us that since the recent coup they have been unable to meet, speak and organize. As one woman stated, "the same people who raped us in 1991 are again in power." The women claimed that the incidences of rape have greatly increased in their communities during the past few months. As one woman said, "all those prisoners who were let out (of prison in February) are raping women. They come to a house, ask for money, and if you don't have money, they rape you."

COFEVIH is unable now to continue their projects, as the women are without financial assistance and are fearful of being in the streets. As they told us, the imprisoning of Lavalas members, the mass firing of Lavalas employees, and the skyrocketing costs of basic foods have further impoverished their communities. One representative summarized their situation: "We have no food to give our kids. We are victims again."

### **Conclusion**

On our trip, we saw first-hand the difference between the realities of Haiti and what has been projected by the mainstream international media. We saw the importance of providing alternative sources of information and projecting the voice of grassroots Haitian activists. We were struck again by the resilience and vitality of the Haitian people, despite the tragedy they have just suffered. The fight for democracy in Haiti has

suffered a severe setback, but it is not over. While much of the world has turned its eyes away from Haiti, the Haitian people have continued to mobilize, organize and resist. They deserve our attention and support.

Nearly five months after the coup d'etat, Haiti is still reeling from the overthrow of its elected government. We have already detailed the disastrous human rights situation and increasing economic attacks against the poor. At the same time, we have noted the efforts of the popular movement to establish and maintain a space in which to exercise the right to protest and the right to speak out on the issues affecting Haitian society. We are concerned that this exercise of democratic rights will continue to be challenged and attacked by the de facto Haitian authorities.

Throughout our trip, we were reminded of the need for independent human rights monitoring in Haiti. The organizations and individuals doing this important work operate with few resources and face great danger. Their work needs to be supported both politically and financially. International presence and accompaniment is an important way to support the return of democracy and human rights in Haiti. Over and over again, activists from popular organizations emphasized the need for human rights observers and international monitoring of demonstrations and popular gatherings. We urge that more people consider coming to Haiti in this capacity. As a peasant organizer told us, "If we do this work right now, we cannot go into it with reserve. We need to give it our hearts."

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*Laura Flynn* is a writer and activist who has worked on human rights and development issues in Haiti since 1991. She lived in Haiti from 1994-2000 and is a former director of international relations of the Aristide Foundation for Democracy. She helped found the Haiti Action Committee and is co-author of *Hidden From the Headlines: The U.S. War Against Haiti*. She is a member of the coordinating committee of the Haiti Accompaniment Project.

*Robert Roth* is a high school social studies teacher and community activist in San Francisco, California. In 1986 and 1988, he participated in accompaniment delegations to both El Salvador and Nicaragua. He has been involved in solidarity work with Haiti since 1992. He is a founding member of the Haiti Action Committee and co-author of *Hidden From the Headlines: The U.S. War Against Haiti*.

*Leslie Fleming* accompanied the "Mothers of the Disappeared in El Salvador" in 1989 and 1990, and founded a support group in California. She teaches anthropology at Merritt College in Oakland, California, is a member of the Haiti Action Committee, and a member of the coordinating committee of the Haiti Accompaniment Project.

*For more information on the Haiti Accompaniment Project:*

Phone: Leslie Fleming (510)558-0371

E-Mail: [Haitiaction@yahoo.com](mailto:Haitiaction@yahoo.com)