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NEWSDESK

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French minister attacked, rebels take Haitian town

By Joseph Guyler Delva

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, Aug 30 (Reuters) - A gang chased a French minister out of a Haitian slum under gunfire on Monday, while former soldiers who helped oust President Jean-Bertrand Aristide took control of a southern town and defied U.N. forces to remove them.

One French gendarme was wounded and a French diplomatic source said he saw at least one person killed in the attack.

The reminders of the impoverished Caribbean country's chronic instability came six months after Aristide, regarded as a champion of the poor, was driven out by an armed revolt and U.S. and French pressure amid allegations of despotism and corruption.

The French diplomatic source said the country's junior foreign minister, Renaud Muselier, had to be hustled out of the Cite Soleil slum in Port-au-Prince after his entourage was attacked by rock-throwing youths.

When Haitian police fired into the air, gang members pulled out shotguns, pistols and other weapons and shot at the visitors, who had been planning to visit a hospital in the slum that still seethes with anger over Aristide's departure.

"We are very surprised that we came under attack when we went to help the hospital," the source, who asked not to be identified, told Reuters.

The violence in the capital, where most of a 2,755-strong U.N. peacekeeping force is on patrol, came after a weekend of trouble in the south that bore echoes of the revolt against Aristide.

Ex-soldiers from the army Aristide disbanded in 1995 attacked a police station in Petit-Goave, 40 miles (65 km) south of the capital and proclaimed themselves in charge of security.

'NOT AFRAID OF U.N. TROOPS'

A contingent of Brazilian-led U.N. troops, backed by armored cars and helicopters, were sent on Sunday to regain control but withdrew without challenging the former soldiers, who witnesses said numbered around 150.

"We are not afraid of U.N. troops. We are the Haitian military, we are trained to fight wars. They'll probably kill us, but we'll fight," their leader, former army Col. Remissainthe Ravix, told Reuters by telephone.

The former soldiers cleared the police station of the white and blue colors of the Haitian national police and repainted it yellow, the color of the defunct army. Former army Sgt. Devil Prophete told Haitian radio ex-soldiers had also taken over a pro-Aristide radio station in the southern town of Jacmel. Interim authorities under Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, appointed by a council of elders to run Haiti until new elections in 2005, sent special police units to Petit-Goave but they took up position well outside town. Latortue urged the former soldiers to negotiate, but he also indicated that demands for re-establishment of the army might not be met. "We want to discuss and negotiate with them, but we also want to tell them the interim government doesn't have the mandate nor the means to re-form the army," Latortue said. The interim government has set a deadline of Sept. 15 for all groups holding illegal weapons to disarm. But Ravix said the authorities had no moral or legal authority to confiscate his men's weapons. "If our weapons are illegal, then the government is also illegal because it came to power thanks to those weapons," he said.

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