

Right wing-led rebellion convulses Haiti

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The violent political conflicts which have shaken Haiti since the end of last year have now exploded into an armed uprising against the government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

On February 5, hundreds of heavily-armed men seized control of Gonaïves, a city of 200,000 which lies about 70 miles north-west of the capital of Port-au-Prince and is situated on the main supply route to the country's second largest city, Cap-Haïtien. Setting fire to the mayor's home and the main police station, the anti-government rebels chased away a few poorly-armed police, then proclaimed that their armed action will continue until Aristide is forced from power. Soon after, a similar revolt occurred in nearby St. Marc.

To date, the rebellion has spread to a dozen towns in the Gonaïves region and in the country's south-west. A government attempt to regain control of Gonaïves, Haiti's fourth-largest city, failed Sunday. But government forces, assisted by pro-Aristide militia, have since retaken three towns, including St-Marc.

On Tuesday, fighting erupted for the first time in the north of the country, with rebels briefly seizing the police station in Dondon, which is on the outskirts of Cap-Haïtien.

Thus far, Port-au-Prince, where the bulk of the 5,000-strong national police force is deployed, has been untouched by the uprising. But for weeks it has been the scene of almost daily pro- and anti-government demonstrations—demonstrations that have led to clashes in which dozens of people have been killed. Opposition forces have called for a mass demonstration on Thursday, which they have billed as the “final blow” against an embattled and weakened Aristide government.

The Gonaïves rebel group has been widely portrayed in the press as a criminal gang, based in the city's slums, that until recently enjoyed the patronage of Aristide and his Lavalas party. “But at its upper echelons,” reports the *Washington Post*, “the group appears to be led by former members of the Haitian military, dissolved in 1994 when Aristide returned to power, and the paramilitary group

that opposed him.”

The paramilitary group to which the *Post* alludes was known as FRAPH. During the three-year rule of the military junta that deposed the first Aristide government in September 1991, FRAPH death squads carried out a campaign of terror aimed at stamping out support for Aristide, who because of his earlier opposition to the Duvalier dictatorship and promises of social reform enjoyed widespread popular support.

Among the very first actions taken by the US marines who restored Aristide to power in 1994 was to raid FRAPH's headquarters and seize thousands of documents. To this day, the US government refuses to turn the FRAPH files over to Haitian authorities or to extradite Emmanuel Constant, FRAPH's founder-leader. Constant, who now lives in New York, has admitted that he was a CIA operative.

Initially the opposition's political leaders—a disparate group of businessmen, ex-Aristide supporters, former Duvalierists and supporters of the 1991 coup—refused to condemn the Gonaïves uprising. But with the United Nations warning of an imminent humanitarian crisis in Haiti and US newspaper editorialists raising fears that Haiti's descent into civil war could trigger a massive influx of Haitian refugees, they began issuing statements disassociating themselves from the violence.

Their objective, however, remains unchanged. By provoking social chaos they hope to convince Washington to use its economic political and military might to force Aristide, whose term ends only in 2006, from office. André Apaid, a sweatshop owner who heads one of the two main opposition groups, declared, “We continue to maintain the nonviolent approach. But the sooner the international community recognizes that Mr. Aristide is the cause of the chaos, the sooner a peaceful process to a transition can take place. The more the wait, the more costly it will be to the United States and the world.”

As for the Bush administration, its opposition to the uprising against Haiti's elected president has been, to say the least, muted. On Monday, State Department

spokesman Richard Boucher said, “The United States strongly condemns the latest wave of violence in Haiti,” but the closest he came to actually condemning what amounts to an attempted coup against an elected government was to issue a perfunctory “call on Haitians to respect the law.” Boucher reserved his strongest criticisms for the Aristide government, saying it “has oftentimes contributed to the violence.”

The next day, Boucher responded to a direct question as to whether Washington wants Aristide to resign by saying, “We recognize that reaching a political settlement will require some fairly thorough changes in the way Haiti is governed and how the security situation is maintained.”

Nevertheless, the Bush administration is—at least as yet—not calling for “regime change” in Haiti. Its preferred solution would see key figures in the opposition incorporated into the government pending the outcome of new elections and a reorganization of the police and other parts of the state apparatus. To this end, it has been promoting the efforts of the 15-member association of Caribbean governments, CARICOM, to mediate between the opposition and Aristide.

The Republican Party establishment has longstanding ties to Aristide’s opponents. With the Bush administration bogged down in Iraq, however, and facing a plunge in popular support at home in an election year, it is wary of Haiti becoming a center of instability in the Caribbean, a region mired in economic crisis. (Indeed, in recent weeks, the Dominican Republic which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, has been rocked by major socio-economic protests.)

As is so often the case, it was left to US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to put the Bush administration’s position most crudely. “Everyone’s hopeful,” he said Tuesday “that the situation which tends to ebb and flow down there [i.e. in Haiti], will stay below a certain threshold. We have no plans to do anything.”

A second reason for the US’s reluctance to press for Aristide’s extra-constitutional ouster is its recognition that the opposition is a disparate grouping lacking popular legitimacy and containing highly combustible elements. Unquestionably, Aristide’s right wing policies—the imposition by him and his Lavalas Party of IMF dictates, his increasing reliance on police repression and gang violence, and his resort to Duvalierist-type racial appeals—have cost him much popular support. To date, however the bulk of the opposition support has come from Haiti’s traditional political and economic elite and its beleaguered middle class.

The weakness of the opposition is recognized even by elements within its own leadership. According to Leslie Maximilien, president of the opposition National Foundation for the Salvation of Haiti, the opposition “all have one rallying cry. They’re tired of Aristide. But if they win the day, then they will probably break up into small pieces again and we’ll be even worse off than we are now.”

With events in Haiti spinning out of control, the Bush administration may yet conclude that it must shift gears and overtly intervene in the island nation, including dispatching US troops. What remains a constant is the indifference and hostility of Washington and Wall Street to the plight of the Haitian masses.

As the political crisis has mounted in Haiti, the US government has taken new steps to ensure that Haitians are not able to seek refuge in the world’s richest country. While in all of 2003 fewer than 1,500 Haitians were intercepted by US coastal guards, the State Department has in the past month begun planning for a refugee detention camp at the Guantanamo military base with as many as 50,000 beds.

Plans are also being made to provide a threadbare justification for such a crude and scandalous violation of the basic right to asylum. Last December, the State Department released a fact sheet that said Haitian migrants are a threat to US national security, without offering the slightest explanation as to the basis of this claim. Earlier, the *Miami Herald* had reported that “US consular officials are ‘scratching our heads’ over US Attorney General John Ashcroft’s claim that Pakistanis, Palestinians and others are using Haiti as a staging point for trying to get into the United States.”



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