

As Marines occupy Port-au-Prince:

Reign of terror follows US-backed coup in Haiti

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The US ouster of President Jean Bertrand Aristide and Haiti's occupation by a US-led military force have set the stage for a bloody wave of repression in the impoverished Caribbean island nation.

By means of covert subversion and overt military intervention, the Bush administration has overthrown a popularly elected president and resurrected political forces linked to decades of dictatorship and counterrevolutionary terror in Haiti.

The landing of the first contingent of several hundred Marines and the hustling of Aristide out the country aboard a US aircraft provided the signal for the "rebels" to enter the capital and set themselves up as a domestic security force.

Led by former death squad members and soldiers linked to previous coup attempts, the well-armed thugs quickly took over the barracks facing the National Palace and declared their intention to reconstitute the Haitian Army. This corrupt and brutal force—a legacy of the first US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934—was disbanded by Aristide in 1995. According to some reports, the army's former commander, General Herard Abraham, is preparing to return from exile in Miami to resume his post.

Among the first acts of the right-wing gunmen was the storming of the penitentiary in Port-au-Prince, freeing some 2,000 prisoners. Apparently, the main aim of this action was to liberate a number of notorious killers from previous dictatorships, including Prosper Avril, who headed a military junta that ruled the country from 1988 to 1990 and was convicted on charges of illegally imprisoning and torturing political dissidents. The action also provided a fresh group of recruits for the terror squads from among the criminals who were let loose.

Guy Philippe, a former army officer and police chief who was charged with drug trafficking and conducting summary executions, is a leader of the "rebels." On Tuesday, he proclaimed himself Haiti's "military chief" and announced his intention to arrest Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, who has remained effectively imprisoned in his office. Other members of Aristide's cabinet fled Haiti, seeking asylum in the neighboring Dominican Republic.

In a telling indication of the political forces unleashed by the US-backed coup, Haiti's former "president for life" Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, who has lived in exile in Paris since 1986, announced that he intends to return to Haiti as soon as possible.

Duvalier, whose regime was responsible for killing tens of

thousands of Haitians, welcomed the landing of US Marines. He told an interviewer from Miami's WFOR television news that the conditions were emerging for his return. "I think I'm getting close and that I will soon have the opportunity to go back to my country," he said.

On Monday, leaders of what have generally been described in the US media as the "rebels" and the "democratic opposition" met at one of the most luxurious hotels in Port-au-Prince. Previously, the "democratic" political opposition had claimed it had no links with the armed "rebels."

Working together, with backing from a group of right-wing ideologues in the US State Department, these forces engineered the ouster of Aristide. The "rebels" include such elements as Louis Jodel Chamblain, who led the Tontons Macoute death squads during the waning years of the Duvalier dictatorship in the 1980s and then returned as one of the heads of the Haitian Front for Advancement and Progress, or FRAPH.

The FRAPH, a paramilitary group formed under the military regime that took power when Aristide was first overthrown in a US-backed coup in 1991, received financial support and political guidance from the US Central Intelligence Agency and is blamed for the murder of at least 3,000 Haitians.

The "democratic opposition" consists largely of political parties and business groups representing the tiny privileged elite that formed the real base of support for the Duvalier dictatorship and subsequent military regimes. With financial and political backing from the US National Endowment for Democracy as well as from the Chirac government in France, it has worked for the last four years to mobilize international support for the removal of Aristide.

It seized on alleged irregularities in the 2000 legislative elections to portray the elected government as illegitimate, though there is no dispute that Aristide and his supporters would have won overwhelmingly no matter what procedures were used. Even polls commissioned by Washington have shown the opposition parties of the ruling elite enjoying the support of no more than 20 percent of the Haitian electorate.

The Bush administration—which stole the US election that same year—cynically used alleged irregularities at the polls in Haiti as a pretext for continuing an aid embargo on the country. The embargo, denying Haiti \$500 million in humanitarian assistance from multiple lending organizations, was first imposed by

President Clinton. It made the convening of new elections a precondition for resuming the aid. While Aristide agreed to another vote, the opposition rejected all proposals, effectively blocking desperately needed funding and further deepening the country's economic and social crisis.

From the outset of the armed wing uprising last month, the Bush administration signaled that it was prepared to tolerate a wave of counterrevolutionary violence to meet its objective of installing a puppet regime committed to defending US interests and those of the native Haitian elite. The *Toronto Globe and Mail* Tuesday cited Canadian diplomatic officials describing Washington's attitude when it was supposedly attempting to broker a power-sharing deal between Aristide and his political opponents. "US officials made it abundantly clear to their counterparts in Ottawa that Washington had a 'high tolerance' for further Haitian bloodshed and would not be pressured into defending Mr. Aristide in order to prevent it," the report said.

While rejecting any military intervention to halt the armed overthrow of the Aristide government, once the coup was completed, a waiting US expeditionary force was rushed to Haiti to consolidate an un-elected regime formed by Haiti's privileged elite.

In its report on Monday's meeting between the gunmen and the political representatives of the Haitian elite, the *New York Times* identified one of the "rebels" as "Faustin," describing him as "a well-spoken man...with an M-4 assault weapon strapped around his neck."

"Right now it's very euphoric; everybody's happy," he told the *Times*. "But behind the happiness, look out." The report added: "He said he had killed former Aristide supporters in the streets of Port-au-Prince, and would kill again in the name of the new government if so ordered."

This is precisely what is happening with the tacit support of the Bush administration and under the gaze of US-led occupation troops. According to press reports from Haiti, the right-wing gunmen have rampaged through the Port-au-Prince slums of La Saline, Cite Soleil and Belaire, hunting down Aristide supporters and carrying out indiscriminate killings.

Interviewed on CNN Monday, Secretary of State Colin Powell made it clear that Washington was in close contact with the death squads. "We have ways of talking to the various rebel leaders, and [we're] pleased that at least so far they've said they are not interested in violence anymore and want to put down their arms," Powell said.

This is one more lie from an administration that has dismissed Aristide's charge that he was forced out of Haiti at US gunpoint as "nonsense." The so-called rebels—whom Powell himself was referring to as "thugs" just two weeks ago—have indicated no intention of laying down their weapons, and violent reprisals are sweeping the capital.

The *Boston Globe* on Tuesday carried a revealing report by Steven Dudley on the activities of paramilitary killing squads in the Port-au-Prince slum of Cite Soleil. "They are upper-class, urban paramilitaries who say they are protecting their property, families and country," Dudley wrote, referring to a squad of over 20 men who were scouring the shantytown, "M-4s, M-14s,

Tech-9s and 9mms at the ready."

"These paramilitary volunteers are businessmen," according to the *Globe* article. "Nearly all of them speak English from time spent in Miami or New England. Most are from Haiti's light-skinned elite, the tiny fraction of the population that actually owns something. Some of them have military training; a few were army reservists in college. All of them have weapons." Most, the article states, had come down to the slums from the upper-class hillside neighborhood of Petionville.

The report quoted one of the gunmen: "We went down every alley, every street. We're cleaning up the neighborhoods." Scores of suspected Aristide supporters have been reported killed in the area. The paramilitaries, it added, were working in close collaboration with the police.

Col. David Berger, the commander of the US Marine force that has secured strategic points in the Haitian capital, told reporters Tuesday, "I have no instruction to disarm the rebels."

Meanwhile, already miserable conditions of life for masses of Haitians are deteriorating rapidly. Food stocks are exhausted and the country's hospitals have largely shut down because of lack of power and potable water, according to a report from the Pan-American Health Organization. The eight most important hospitals in Port-au-Prince have stopped admitting patients.

According to the International Red Cross, the only functioning medical facility in the capital was an emergency field hospital set up by a group of Cuban doctors, who attended to scores of gunshot victims.

While officials in Washington indicated that the Marines' rules of engagement do not encompass defending Haiti's civilian population from armed violence, a principal mission of the US-led force is halting the flight of refugees from the strife-torn nation.

Coast Guard vessels have been deployed off of the Haitian coast and already close to 1,000 "boat people" have been sent back. Only last week, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees issued a formal statement calling on countries in the region to suspend the forced repatriation of Haitians fleeing the humanitarian crisis there. Washington ignored the call.

"Given the violence and disorder reigning in Port-au-Prince, the Haitians should never have been returned there," said Joanne Mariner, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Americas Division. "With people being shot dead in the street by gangs of criminal thugs, it was unconscionable for the United States to dump entire families into this danger zone."



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