

US-led occupation force targets Haiti's slums

Keith Jones
20 March 2004

The US-led international “stabilization” force that descended on Haiti after Washington engineered a coup against the Caribbean-island country’s elected president has begun moving aggressively into urban areas loyal to deposed president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The force’s stated aim is to restore order by disarming both pro-and anti-Aristide groups. But its targeting of the slums of Port-au-Prince underscores that the principal goal of the stabilization force is to quell popular opposition to Haiti’s new US-installed regime.

Last weekend US Marines repeatedly made bloody forays into Belair, a poor neighborhood near the presidential palace. The Marines reported that they killed two gunmen after coming under attack on the evening of Friday, March 12. But Belair residents told Reuters that as many as 11 bystanders had been killed in crossfire and relatives of several persons shot by the Marines insisted to the Associated Press that they had not been involved in political violence. US Marine Major Richard Cruson vehemently denied the Belair residents’ claims, but conceded no weapons had been recovered from the alleged gunmen.

Last Sunday, a Marine was shot and wounded in Belair while US forces exchanged fire with *chimères*, armed gangs supportive of Haiti’s deposed president. The next day, 120 Marines swept through the neighborhood. Some were on foot, others in armoured vehicles mounted with machine guns. International news agencies reported many Belair residents were defiant, taunting the US forces as occupiers and shouting “Vive Aristide.”

By midweek, French troops were setting up roadblocks in the Cité du Soleil to search for weapons. The Cité, the original base of Aristide’s popular support, is a massive slum aside Port-au-Prince harbor. Many of its 400,000 residents live in one-room shacks lacking both electricity and running water.

The stabilization force’s intrusion into the shantytowns and poorer neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince stands in sharp contrast to the hands off approach both it and the new government have adopted toward the rebel army that the Bush administration and Haiti’s self-styled democratic opposition—a disparate coalition dominated by the country’s traditional business and political elite—used to topple Aristide.

The rebels are led by and comprised of enforcers of former Haitian dictatorships, including leaders of the notorious FRAPH death squad. Senior Bush administration officials have

themselves labelled the rebels thugs and criminals. Yet almost three weeks after Aristide was driven from power and the US-led stabilization force began deploying to Haiti, the rebels continue to be allowed to function as the effective government in much of the country, including Haiti’s second largest city, Cap-Haitien. Under their rule, an unknown number of Aristide supporters have been killed in a wave of reprisal killings.

Light on the rebels’ modus operandi is shed by a March 17 *Miami Herald* report. It says the rebels who control the Haitian border city of Ouanaminthe kidnapped 13 visitors from the Dominican Republic last weekend and held them hostage until they secured the release of a rebel arrested by Dominican authorities for killing two Dominican soldiers on border patrol February 14. Caciano Lora, governor of the adjacent Dominican province, told the *Herald* he had no choice but to bow to the rebels’ demands: “We complied with the demand because the lives of Dominicans were at risk. We were told they would assassinate them if we didn’t release their leader.”

On Tuesday, retired Haitian army general Herard Abraham—the soon-to-be named minister of the interior and national security in Haiti’s new government—met with rebel commander Guy Philippe. Following the meeting, Philippe told Reuters the two had discussed disarming Aristide’s supporters, then boasted that Abraham had made no mention of the need for the rebels to disarm, let alone quizzed him about the modalities of any rebel disarmament.

Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Davis, commander of what will soon be a 450-man Canadian army contingent in Haiti, has signalled that the stabilization force will skirt the issue of the rebels as long as they continue to vow loyalty to the US’s puppet regime. Haiti’s traditional elite has feted the rebels as heroes.

“Any weapons that could potentially pose a threat to the multinational force will be confiscated,” Davis affirmed on arriving in Haiti Wednesday. “We will disarm the bad guys, but those people entitled to have weapons for any number of reasons yet to be defined will have an opportunity to carry them.”

Haiti’s business elite have large numbers of armed men in their pay. Many of these security guards are recruits from the Haitian armed forces, which Aristide disbanded in 1995 because of its decades-long role in supporting bloody authoritarian regimes. Should Philippe and his men not realize their ambition to be incorporated in a revived Haitian army,

many of the rebels will undoubtedly find employment in these private armies.

Although Aristide—Haiti’s effective ruler from 1994 through his ouster last month—abandoned his reform program and implemented the incendiary socioeconomic prescriptions of the IMF, the Bush administration long sought regime change in Haiti. Like Haiti’s traditional business and political elite, the Republican right identified the defrocked Silesian priest with an intolerable popular challenge to the socioeconomic order that has made Haiti the most impoverished and socially polarized country in the Americas.

The character of the coup the Bush administration orchestrated in Haiti is further indicated by the composition of the new government formed in Port-au-Prince.

Initially, both Bush administration officials and Gérard Latortue—the man delegated as Haiti’s interim prime minister by a US-sponsored committee of “eminent persons”—spoke about the need for a government of “national unity” that would have representation from all the country’s major political forces. Yet the new 13-member cabinet does not include even one member of Aristide’s Lavalas Party.

“There is no climate of national reconciliation,” exclaimed Leslie Voltaire, who was the token Lavalas representative on the “eminent persons” committee. “We are under threat, we can’t meet. There is a witch-hunt against Lavalas.”

Latortue has justified the exclusion of Lavalas from his cabinet by claiming he opted for a government of “technocrats,” and also didn’t name any leaders of the anti-Aristide parties. But virtually all of his ministers were themselves either well-known opponents of Aristide, like Justice Minister Bernard Gousse, or were nominated by organizations that played a prominent role in the opposition Group of 184.

The exclusion of the most prominent leaders of the anti-Aristide opposition parties makes it all the more probable that General Abraham will emerge as the government’s true leader. Whereas Latortue is a Florida-based business consultant and television host who has spent most of the last four decades outside in Haiti, Abraham is well-known to both Washington and Haiti’s elite.

Abraham was the head of Haiti’s armed forces from 1987 to 1990, including during the bloody dictatorship of General Prosper Avril. He then supervised the transition to an elected government in 1990-91. Under Abraham’s tutelage, Washington expected that Marc Bazin, a former World Bank official it had groomed for Haiti’s presidency, would secure victory. But, to its consternation, Haiti’s hitherto disenfranchised poor brought Aristide to power.

Abraham was on the “eminent persons” short list for the post of interim prime minister. However, ultimately it was deemed so blatant a handing of the reins of power to a lifelong member of Haiti’s reviled armed forces would further undermine the regime’s claim to popular and constitutional legitimacy.

No sooner was Abraham sworn in as interior and national security minister than he announced that a commission will be established to study how the army—for decades the principal bulwark of Haitian reaction—can be revived. Declared Abraham, “With the instability and the amount of guns that are spread around the country, we need a force that can proceed with disarmament.”

US Ambassador James Foley was quick to hail the new government. He told the press, “Latortue chose wisely,” adding that Haiti could now expect a significant inflow of aid from Washington.

For his part, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin has told Latortue he will visit Haiti within the next month to demonstrate France’s support for the new government. Never in the 200 years since Haiti won its independence from France has a French foreign minister previously deigned to visit the Caribbean-island country.

Canada has also emerged as a pillar of Haiti’s US-imposed government. It is the third largest contributor to the 2,800-man, four-country stabilization force and Ottawa has indicated it will probably keep troops in the country after the stabilization force’s three-month UN Security Council mandate expires.

Outside the confines of Washington, Paris and Ottawa, Haiti’s new government is sorely lacking in international legitimacy. The association of Caribbean states, CARICOM, and the 53-country African Union have demanded an investigation into the circumstances under which the US and France refused to assist Aristide’s government in meeting the rebel challenge, then hustled Haiti’s elected-president from the country.

Jamaica has refused to recognize Haiti’s new government, pending a meeting of Caricom slated for March 25-26. And to Washington’s dismay, since last Monday Jamaica has been giving Aristide, who was being held under virtual house arrest in the Central African Republic, temporary refuge. So incensed is the Bush administration, it is preparing to retaliate against Jamaica. The *Miami Herald* quotes a “well-placed US official as saying, “I think you are going to see a cooling of relations. Their actions on Haiti ... have damaged US-CARICOM relations a great deal.”



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