

Haiti's US-installed prime minister hails fascist gunmen

Keith Jones
25 March 2004

A government rally in Gonaïves March 20 has provided further proof that the Bush administration, the “political opposition” to Haiti’s deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and the fascist gunmen who overran the Caribbean-island country have been acting in concert.

Appearing outside Port-au-Prince for the first time since becoming Haiti’s Prime Minister, Gérard Latortue hailed the rebels—a force led by and comprised of thugs of previous dictatorships, including the FRAPH death squad—as “freedom fighters.”

While US and French military personnel manned a security perimeter, a Haitian government delegation led by Latortue, the rebels, and a crowd of just three thousand out of Gonaïves’ more than 200,000 residents celebrated the ouster of Haiti’s elected president.

Throughout the visit, Latortue and his entourage were intent on bestowing legitimacy on the rebels and on demonstrating their eagerness to work with them in creating a “new Haiti.”

On his arrival in Haiti’s fourth-largest city, Latortue was greeted by a delegation of rebel leaders, including their chief, former Haitian army and police officer Guy Philippe. Another rebel leader then gave the Prime Minister a wooden key, purportedly to symbolize the transfer of authority from the rebels—who have controlled Gonaïves since seizing it February 5—to Latortue’s US-installed regime.

But in Gonaïves, as across Haiti, the rebels continue to wield much power. Rebel soldiers joined a handful of Haitian police officers in providing Latortue and his retinue with security while in Gonaïves, and rebel leaders, including Philippe, flanked the prime minister on the platform of the pro-government rally that was the climax of the trip.

When the crowd chanted for the suppression of

Aristide’s supporters and the arrest of members of the deposed government such as Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, the justice minister in the new government, Bernard Gousse, declared, “I want all criminals to be judged.” Gousse was oblivious to the irony that many of those on the platform are themselves killers and gangsters.

Latortue said many outside Haiti believed those who had risen in armed rebellion against Aristide “were thugs and bandits,” but he knew better. “They are freedom fighters.”

Joining Latortue and the rebel leaders on the platform of the Gonaïves rally was the OAS’s special representative to Haiti, David Lee. A Canadian diplomat who played an important role in trumpeting the anti-Aristide opposition’s claims to be a beleaguered democratic opposition, Lee gave his blessing to Latortue’s public embrace of the rebels. Said Lee, “We’re trying to encourage reconciliation. Of course we don’t agree that violence should be rewarded, but I think what we see here today is an effort put forth by the citizens of Gonaïves to turn over a new leaf.”

Philippe, who only four days earlier had met with Haiti’s new Minister of Interior—the former head of the disbanded Haitian army, General Herard Abraham—told Reuters, “Today is a very important day for us. It officially marks the end of hostilities.” He refused, however, to say when the rebels will surrender their weapons.

Meanwhile, Butteur Metayer, the leader of a Gonaïves-based criminal gang that threw in its lot with the rebels, told Associated Press, “Our plan is to keep working with the government, (but) if the government cannot work with us, we will overthrow it.”

Latortue’s cavorting with the rebels has prompted

much critical comment from Haitian and international human rights groups. But it has been defended by the Haitian government and by spokesmen for the Group of 184 and Democratic Convergence, anti-Aristide coalitions dominated by Haiti's traditional, authoritarian business and political elite. "The rebels are heroes in Gonaïves and they are heroes throughout Haiti, whether you like it or not," declared Charles Baker, a wealthy industrialist and Group of 184 leader.

In the days immediately following Aristide's ouster, the Bush administration demonstratively sought to distance itself from the rebels, so as to cover its tracks and claim *post-facto* that it had not used a rebel force that it concedes is led by criminals and thugs to overthrow Haiti's elected and internationally-recognized government. But it has said nothing about Latortue's praise of the rebels, thus signalling that as long as Philippe professes loyalty to the US-installed government and doesn't interfere with the US-led military occupation of Haiti, Washington has no objections to the rebels functioning as armed allies of the government.

As under the Duvaliers and the Avril and Cédras military juntas, Washington is quite prepared to see violence inflicted on the Haitian masses, so as to uphold a regime subservient to US interests and secure a socio-economic order that has made Haiti the Western Hemisphere's poorest country.

It is now almost four weeks since the February 29 fall of Aristide's government. More than 3,200 US, French, Canadian and Chilean troops have now been deployed to Haiti.

Yet at most only token numbers of "international stabilization" troops have been dispatched to Haiti's second, third and fourth largest cities, respectively—Cap-Haïtien, Les Cayes and Gonaïves. In effect, the rebels have been given free rein to mount a reign of terror against supporters of Aristide.

Information as to the situation on the ground is scant, but nevertheless chilling. According to the Associated Press' Paisley Dodds, in Cap-Haïtien the former second in command of FRAPH, Louis-Jodel Chamblain, is presiding over an ad hoc "court" that is trying persons accused of everything from theft to being Aristide supporters. Chamblain is himself a convicted killer, having been found guilty *in absentia* for the 1993 murder of a prominent Aristide supporter

and a 1994 shantytown massacre.

Both local fishermen and a spokesman for the French military, which has deployed troops to Cap-Haïtien, report that corpses continue to be found in the bay that Haiti's second largest city bestrides. Officials also report, writes Dodd, that "dozens of bullet-riddled bodies have been brought to the morgue in the last month."

In Les Cayes, the rebels are reportedly carrying out public executions. Elisabeth Byrs, a United Nations spokesperson, says that NGOs in Les Cayes have sent word that without even the pretence of a trial accused thieves are being paraded in the public square and then shot dead.



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