

Haiti's President Martelly seeks to bring back military as internal police force

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Two reports (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/LACRegion/Pages/HTReports.aspx>) issued recently by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights document murders and torture committed by the Haitian National Police (PNH) over the past year. The reports come amid disagreements between Haitian president Michelle Martelly, the UN, and imperialist powers about the most effective method—UN troops, the PNH, or a restored Haitian army—of suppressing the country's workers as international capital seeks cheap labor there.

The most prominent case reported by the UN involves the torture and death in custody of a man accused of killing Guiteau Toussaint, president of the National Bank of Credit (BNC). Three days after Toussaint's murder, Serge Démosthène and Feckel Plaisimond were arrested in the Carradeux neighborhood of Port-au-Prince without probable cause by Petionville police who did not have jurisdiction in the neighborhood. Démosthène's house was later searched without a warrant.

Sources told the UN investigators that Démosthène may have been targeted as a result of land disputes in the neighborhood, where the wife of one of the government officials involved in the torture owns several properties.

Démosthène was tortured with black bags placed over his head to threaten suffocation and beaten on the head with a baton while a book was held in place to disguise the source of trauma. His "confession" was then videotaped, and he died in detention shortly thereafter. The police commissioner of Petionville was smoking on the balcony and ordering a meal at the time of death. That night, all of the lights in the police station were turned off as the body and the government officials involved were driven away.

Feckel Plaisimond was also tortured but survived and was released from the national penitentiary without a trial.

The effects of the case rippled upward, with the subsequent firing of Harrycidas Auguste, a state

prosecutor involved in the torture, and an attempt by Inspector General Jude Altidort of the PNH to resign when its director general challenged his report. The prime minister at first refused to accept the resignation, but later fired Altidort for "insubordination."

In a second case, two men were executed after being arrested for posterity on behalf of presidential candidate Mirlande Manigat in Port-au-Prince. The police pretext for the arrest was that one, Jeune Sterson, had had a disagreement with a female friend of a member of the arresting brigade. Louis Frantz tried to protest Sterson's arrest and was also taken in. While the police claimed that the woman in question had filed a complaint against Sterson, there is no record of such a complaint in the log books.

When they arrived at the police commissariat, one of the arresting brigade made a sign to the Chef de Poste that Frantz and Sterson should be killed. The UN investigators found credible the reports that this signal—which involved shouting "zero" while making the sign of the cross—was used. After the bodies were found, the police physically intimidated witnesses and family members while trying to blame the killing on an armed gang.

While documenting these grisly cases and reminding the PNH of relevant international laws, the UN reports state that "the PNH is a fundamental institution" and that "without the assurance of law enforcement and public safety that can only be provided by an effective and law-abiding PNH, Haiti's political, social and economic stability cannot be assured."

The UN—along with the US, Canadian, and French governments—is working with Martelly to determine a more effective force for suppressing Haitian workers. Minustah, the UN force that has been in the country since Jean-Bertrande Aristide was overthrown in 2004, has been discredited by rapes, murderous raids in poor neighborhoods, and the cholera epidemic.

Laurent Lamothe, Haiti's foreign minister, recently told the web site HYPERLINK “<http://www.dialogo-americas.com>” www.dialogo-americas.com “that a national army is crucial in order to attract the foreign investment Haiti so desperately needs.”

On November 18—the anniversary of the 1803 Battle of Vertières, in which Jean Jacques Dessalines defeated French forces—Martelly gave a speech outlining his plans to restore the Haitian army, which was disbanded by Aristide in 1995. Martelly sought to exploit anti-Minustah sentiment, complaining of the “presence...on our soil of foreign soldiers” and of the failure of the Haitian government to “ensure its primary responsibility: the security of its people and their belongings.”

In reality, the people that Martelly seeks to protect are the wealthy business owners who have hired private security forces in recent years.

Martelly declared that “the army has always given structure to Haitian society during the last 200 years...always with the concern of maintaining intact the ideals of 1804: live free or die!” These words stand in stark contrast to the reality of Haitian military history: torture, massacres of unarmed civilians, and bloody coups d'états, always in the service of local elites or foreign imperialism.

The Haitian military has not fought in a foreign war since it was kicked out of the neighboring Dominican Republic in 1843. Since then, it has been used as a police force and a prop for dictatorships and coups. Its twentieth century incarnation originated in the *Garde d'Haïti*, a puppet force created by the US Marines during its 19-year occupation of the country, which ended in 1934.

Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier came to power in 1957 with the backing of the army, inaugurating a 30-year dictatorship. While under the Duvaliers the army was forced to share some of the spoils with the regime’s brutal secret police/militia, the Tonton Macoutes, it emerged as just as murderous a force after the downfall of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier in 1986.

General Henri Namphy took power after Duvalier’s ouster and was accused of practicing “duvalierism without Duvalier.” Namphy was overthrown by General Prosper Avril, who had been a member of Francois Duvalier’s Presidential Guard and was personally involved in torture during his own regime. According to Paul Farmer, “victims included opposition politicians, union leaders, scholars, even a doctor trying to practice community medicine.”

In 1991, Lt. Gen. Raoul Cedras overthrew the elected

president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Cedras’s regime murdered at least 3,000 people during its three-year rule, and his coup was one of the reasons that Aristide later disbanded the army.

In his speech, Martelly referred to these crimes as only “excesses” and “smudges” on the military’s reputation, while appealing for support from officers and soldiers who “were demobilized under humiliating conditions in 1995.” The military, he said, was unfairly treated during Aristide’s “political turmoil.”

He cynically employed a favorite tool of right-wing demagogues, arguing that “new evils (kidnapping, rapes, armed robberies, etc.)” make a police state necessary. In truth, these crimes are the result of centuries of oppression and of the abject poverty in which international capital has kept Haiti, seeking to exploit it as a low-wage haven.

In his bid to revive the army, Martelly has appointed a commission that includes the secretaries of state for national defense and public security to “study” the issue. The commission is, in part, an attempt to placate foreign concerns about the move, as the imperialist powers are worried that a popular revolt might break out.

Its decision was a foregone conclusion: on January 1, Martelly’s spokesman announced that the commission supports the army’s restoration.

The commission has yet to release its report, but at least one member has experience with carrying the military’s water. Yvan Richard Maurasse, currently the secretary of state for national defense, was on a governmental commission appointed to investigate the massacre of voters during the November 1987 elections. The report whitewashed the military’s role in the killings, and, according to the Organization of American States, “obeyed the implicit governmental mandate not to implicate the military.”



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