Reports indicate Haitian government involvement in La Saline massacre

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The La Saline massacre, which occurred in Haiti on November 13, rivals the crimes of the Duvalier dictatorship and of the military regimes that seized power after Duvalier fell. Fifty-nine people, including children as young as three years old, were murdered in La Saline in a premeditated slaughter. Only the Jean-Rabel massacre, perpetrated in 1987 by the regime of Henri Namphy with support from tontons macoutes, has involved more deaths.

La Saline is a poor neighborhood in Port-au-Prince, described by PBS as a place where people "cook over open fires in alleyways so narrow that two people can't pass without touching shoulders." The Saint Jean Bosco church of Jean-Bertrand Aristide was in La Saline, and recent protests against government corruption have found support there. It is located on the other side of a canal from the former Fort Dimanche prison, where the Duvaliers tortured and murdered thousands of people.

La Saline also houses a commercial port with three terminals, and the Croix-des-Bossales market that sells produce from the country to restaurants, wholesalers and supermarkets. Early press reports blamed the killings on gangs fighting over control of the market.

The National Network for the Defense of Human Rights (RNDDH) has conducted a thorough investigation of the massacre, including interviews with survivors, family members, hundreds of La Saline residents, judicial and police figures, and a parliamentary deputy. The resulting report describes how for years the government has made use of the armed gangs, about whose murders and extortion it is fully aware, to subdue the population. People interviewed accuse government figures of supplying arms and money to the gangs.

The report describes how, in October 2017, a commission including the minister of the interior, the minister of public health, and the wife of President Jovenel Moïse, visited La Saline to promise the rebuilding of one school, the creation of another, and the renovation of a public health facility. In return, they demanded that residents keep protesters from marching through the neighborhood. The residents refused.

One year later, the protests of October 2018 made use of the neighborhood as a meeting place.

The RNDDH names several government figures accused of direct involvement in the November 13 massacre. Fednel Monchery, director general of the Ministry of the Interior, is accused of having participated in the planning and of having furnished arms and vehicles.

Joseph Pierre Richard Duplan, former mayor of Port-au-Prince, is accused of having supplied arms and uniforms. Some perpetrators of the massacre were wearing Haitian National Police (PNH) uniforms. Separately, Duplan has been questioned in the disappearance of news photographer Vladjimir Legagneur 11 months ago.

Police agent Gregory Antoine is accused of having participated directly in the massacre, fighting alongside the Base Nan Chabon gang. Police agent Jimmy Cherizier is accused of having participated directly and of having hosted the meeting at which the massacre was planned.

A lawsuit filed by 13 residents of La Saline in December seeks to determine whether the president, the prime minister, the minister of justice, the minister of the interior, and the director general of the PNH were involved, according to *Le Nouvelliste.* The 13 people bringing the suit represent a group of more than 50, most of whom remained anonymous out of fear for their safety.

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The 59 murders were gruesome: People were dragged out of homes and executed point blank; others were chopped to death with machetes; children were shot in their homes; bodies were burned, chopped into pieces, left in heaps of garbage, and fed to pigs. Women were raped.

The RNDDH was able to identify 45 of the 59 dead and includes details of their murders in its report. When it confronted the police and judiciary with its findings, they claimed ignorance. The police claimed not to know how many were killed, while the judicial authorities said they had "no precise information relating to the events." The report also notes that, aside from the announcement by Prime Minister Jean Henry Ceant that he was opening an investigation, the government made no pronouncements in the first two weeks after the massacre.

The silence and evasion foreshadow future crimes. The government of Ceant and President Moïse is in deep crisis, and desperate. Moïse's previous prime minister resigned after his attempts to cut fuel subsidies caused massive protests last July.

Haiti's rate of inflation was more than 15 percent last year and its currency continues to drop against the dollar. A shortage of gasoline and diesel is developing because of the government's inability to pay the company that has been importing them from the US since Haiti's participation in the PetroCaribe program. More protests against austerity and corruption are planned in February.

The big bourgeoisie has come out publicly against Moïse, with Reginald Boulos criticizing him for having voted against Venezuela's membership in the Organization of American States and Dimitri Vorbe of Sogener telling the TV program "Haïti, sa k ap kwit" that "the state needs to be organized to create all the conditions needed to promote the functioning of businesses in Haiti, which would allow them to make money, but also to give it to the state (in taxes)."

On January 14, protests occurred in the commune of Lascahobas after months of electricity rationing. After the protesters blocked traffic with barricades, police from the Departmental Unit for the Maintenance of Order (UDMO) fired live ammunition, killing at least two. One of the victims was shot in the heart.

In December the offices of Radio Kiskeya, known for its political reporting since 1994, burned to the ground after a fire spread from the building next door. Liliane Pierre-Paul, one of its founders, had survived torture and exile by the Duvalier regime in the 1980s. In 2015, at a time when the station was critical of then-president Michel Martelly, an unidentified person fired shots at the station.

In the weeks following the fire, which destroyed not just the station but its archives as well, criticism of the government's response was limited to the underfunding of firefighters, who took more than an hour to respond. However, *Le Nouvelliste* reported this week that Pierre-Paul and Director General Jean Marvell Dandin filed a lawsuit on January 18 demanding that the court investigate whether the fire was set. The suit also asks the judge to determine whether the firefighters were delayed deliberately by the government.

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