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Haiti: Rule of law must be protected

The precarious rule of law in Haiti and the Haitian institutions meant to be responsible for protecting human rights were further weakened this weekend, said Amnesty International after armed gangs attacked police stations, prisons and court houses in a number of towns, forcing officials to flee.

Reports indicate that more than 15 people, including police officers and local residents, have been killed.

"Amnesty International deplores the reported killings of local inhabitants and bystanders during armed confrontations between police and armed gangs in the towns of Gonaives and St. Marc," the organization said.

"We call on the Haitian police, while carrying out their duty to protect the rule of law in the face of these threats to public security, to respect international human rights standards regarding the use of force and firearms. Moreover, the attacks must be investigated and those responsible brought to justice."

It has not been possible to confirm exact details of those killed or injured as both telephone and road access to the region has been inhibited during the unrest.

"All actors, whether in government, in opposition parties or in armed groups, must immediately take steps under the Haitian Constitution and international law to halt the breakdown in the rule of law. Strict compliance with human rights standards is an essential condition for resolving the crisis currently affecting the country," Amnesty International concluded.

Background information

The police station in the main Artibonite town of Gonaives was overrun by attackers on 5 February, and a police attempt to regain possession on 7 February failed after an intense firefight. Similarly, the police station in the nearby town of St. Marc was taken over by armed attackers on 7 February, and government buildings, as well as the town's port, were subsequently looted.

The attacks in Gonaives have been attributed to an armed group formerly known as the 'Cannibal Army,' which is now referred to as the "Front de résistance révolutionnaire de l'Artibonite," "Artibonite Revolutionary Resistance Front." Its leaders have called for the departure of President Jean Bertrand Aristide and the choosing of a replacement by opposition political parties. In St. Marc, the destruction of the police station and court house have been attributed to members of another group also calling for Aristide's replacement. Police stations and other government buildings have been ransacked,

and roads barricaded, in a number of other towns throughout the Artibonite, North and West departments of Haiti.

The attacks have been carried out in a context of widening political violence in which the Haitian National Police have been accused of numerous violations, armed groups have targeted government officials and activists, most frequently those supportive of embattled President Jean Bertrand Aristide have committed abuses against perceived opponents.

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