

Urgent Action In Focus

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[picture caption]

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Haiti – a country in crisis

The people of Haiti gained independence from French colonial rule to become the world's first black republic in 1804, but since then they have endured a series of dictatorships, the most notorious being those of the Duvaliers. François Duvalier ("Papa Doc") came to power in 1957. He died in 1971 and was succeeded by his son Jean-Claude ("Baby Doc"), who was finally forced to flee the country in 1986.

In 1990, after several short-lived governments characterised by widespread and systematic human rights violations, Haiti held what independent observers called its first truly free and fair elections for president, won by Jean-Bertrand Aristide, then a popular Roman Catholic priest from an impoverished parish in the slums of the capital, Port-au-Prince. He had only been in office for seven months when he was overthrown by the army, who set up a repressive military government. The US military intervened in 1994 to restore Aristide to power.

As required by the constitution, Aristide stood down after his second term (though he had spent most of his first term in exile) and was succeeded in 1996 by another candidate from his Fanmi Lavalas party, René Preval. However, he stood again in 2000, and won, but the vote in this and earlier

Senate elections was disputed. Aristide's support, at home and abroad, began to collapse. In January 2004 the parliamentarians elected in 2000 came to the end of their terms: some opposition parties refused to take part in new elections whilst Aristide remained in power, so Aristide began to rule by decree. Violent opposition to him spread within his former power base in the urban slums. Rebels led by former officers from the police and members of the army, which had been disbanded by Aristide in 1995, seized control of much of the country, and as they threatened to advance on Port-au-Prince and remove the president by force, he fled the country in disputed circumstances on a US military aircraft.

Following the departure of Aristide on 29 February, the President of Haiti's Supreme Court, Boniface Alexandre, was immediately named provisional president. The same day, a UN force of Canadian, French and Chilean troops, under US military command, began a three-month mission to restore order in the country. It was known as the "Multinational Interim Force" (MIF). On 9 March, Gérard Latortue was appointed interim Prime Minister after he was chosen by a seven-member "Council of the Wise" (Conseil des Sages) who act as counsellors to the transitional government in the absence of the parliament. Latortue is now in charge

of forming a new government of "national unity" which will be put in place following the elections that are scheduled to run from October to December this year.

In June 2004, the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) took over from the MIF and began the deployment of 1622 UN civilian police and 6700 military. It has a mandate to support the transitional government by ensuring a secure and stable environment for the political process to take place and assist in monitoring, restructuring and reforming the Haitian National Police (HNP).

[picture caption]

Minustah vehicle on patrol

The transitional government has made little tangible progress towards protecting human rights since it took office and the peacekeeping mission arrived in Haiti. Armed groups, including members of the former military, have not been disarmed and exercise effective control in some towns. Civilians are dying every day during confrontations between armed groups and criminal gangs, and in unlawful police operations. Haiti's current human rights situation could worsen in the run-up to this year's elections.

Hundreds of people have been detained without charge or trial; the most prominent is former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune (see UA 115/05, AMR 36/004/2005, 06 May 2005, for further details). Yvon Neptune turned himself in to the police in June 2004 after he was accused by a local human rights organization of masterminding the killings of opposition partisans in the town of Saint-Marc on 11 February that year. He has now spent nearly a year in prison, without any formal charges having been laid against him. Neptune began a hunger strike in April and his health has deteriorated

steadily. However, the transitional government and outside observers have maintained a close watch on his health. He is now reportedly drinking water fortified with sugar, salt and vitamins. More importantly, Neptune was finally brought before a judge on 25 May 2005, although he was apparently not accompanied by a lawyer.

[picture caption]

Amnesty researchers interviewing prisoners during 2004 mission to Haiti

Another worrying trend has been the HNP's frequent use of excessive force against civilians. There have been several incidents where officers of the HNP have shot and killed people involved in peaceful demonstrations: in February 2005 two people were killed in this way, and in April five people were shot dead at an apparently peaceful demonstration by Lavalas party supporters. Several others were hit and later died from their injuries (see UA 105/05, AMR 36/003/2005, 29 April 2005).

UAs are a great campaigning tool to focus the attention of the public and of the authorities, and in Haiti they serve to highlight the fact that the human rights abuses which occur there are not going unnoticed by the rest of the world. With the lack of any strong central authority it is imperative that we draw attention to these abuses to as many sectors of society as possible which is why UAs on Haiti are addressed to a number of different authorities: MINUSTAH, the transitional government, the National Police and so on. The work done on UAs by the network is invaluable in the fight to bring abuses to light and with the likely increase in political tension across the country as the elections approach the people of Haiti will be relying more than ever on international solidarity against human rights abuses, and the efforts of the UA network will be a key part of this.

