

Haiti's Troubles Continue¹

Robert Maguire

“Civilized people do not lurk in the bushes to support terrorist coups d’etat.” So spoke Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide on January 1, 2002 during his Independence Day speech at the National Palace in Port-au-Prince, where, 15 days earlier, three-dozen heavily armed commandos launched an apparent pre-dawn coup attempt against his government. “The people have suffered too much,” Aristide continued. “They have said that they do not at all want to go into hiding again. We want to live in peace and we must have peace.” Condemning violence and referring to the country’s current environment of political cynicism as exuding “the virus of division,” the President called upon Haitians to “fight for our country instead of fighting one another.” Sadly, as Haiti enters the New Year, the unabated power struggle among the country’s politicians has been joined by a renewal of the kind of paramilitary violence that the vast majority of Haitians hoped had ended with the disbandment of the Haitian Armed Forces in 1995.

The December 17th palace attack, a violent episode that left at least eight dead - including five of the attackers, was quickly characterized by some as an assassination attempt on the President (who was sleeping at his suburban residence) and by Aristide’s hard line detractors as a “staged event.” It rapidly sent shock waves throughout the country, provoking an angry response from some government supporters, who rallied in the streets, launching angry reprisals against offices and homes of Aristide’s most vocal

¹ Published in Nueva Sociedad, Caracas, January 2002

detractors, including erstwhile Aristide ally Gerard Pierre-Charles, now a prominent leader of the minority opposition coalition Democratic Convergence (CD). Fueling these reprisals was the opposition's response to the palace attack. As they did in late July, when an armed attack on Haiti's Police Academy left several dead, opposition leaders, rather than denouncing the violence, death and threat to national security posed by the attackers, immediately condemned the Aristide government, accusing Mr. Aristide of staging the coup to orchestrate attacks against them.

Although various government officials - including Aristide - spoke out against the reprisals, and the Minister of Justice created a commission to investigate the "crimes" that took place following the palace attack, the opposition ramped up its international verbal assault on Aristide and his government. Its rhetoric was fueled by international criticism, such as an anonymous US State Department official's declaration regarding the "failure of the Haitian government to protect its people from mob violence." Such is the poisonous political atmosphere in – and beyond - Haiti.

As the smoke cleared in Port-au-Prince, however, early allegations of a staged event appeared off the mark. Among those captured by Haitian authorities, or implicated in the attack by the prisoners, are former officers of the Haitian National Police and/or the disbanded Haitian Armed Forces (FAd'H), including several individuals implicated in the July Police Academy attack. Evidence gathered by the Haitian police indicates that the commandos apparently planned their palace assault while in the Dominican Republic, where several, including alleged ringleader Guy

Philippe, a former police chief and FAd'H veteran, had fled previously. Philippe, who also has links to Haitian officers exiled in Ecuador following a previous aborted incident, has been detained by the Dominican government which, thus far, has refused to turn him over to Haitian authorities.

While not directly implicated in this incident, Aristide's political enemies, with their harsh rhetoric and intransigence toward the government, most likely have emboldened the remnants of Haiti's military and paramilitary forces that are inclined to resort to weapons and violence to settle disputes and seize power. Indeed, at least one opposition leader openly called, earlier in the year, for a return of the Haitian army as a means of removing Aristide from power. Such statements have tended to reinforce the general lack of support among the Haitian populace for the opposition groups, many of which are widely associated with the 1997-98 Parliament that tied the hands of the Preval government through its intransigence and inaction, and, as such, contributed significantly to the genesis of today's political crisis. Many in Haiti continue to view the CD as a collection of failed politicians who are more intent on bringing down Aristide than on finding solutions to the country's myriad problems.

Those problems, combined with allegations of corruption and waste within the Aristide government, as well as that government's general incapability to effectively meet citizens' expectations, are reportedly beginning to give rise to growing cynicism toward both Aristide and his detractors, and to a concurrent renewal of the kind of grassroots mobilizing for political and economic change seen throughout Haiti during the

1980's. After years of dashed hopes, unimpressive public leadership and political turbulence, community organizations independent of political affiliation appear to once again be gaining momentum as agitators for change.

In the meantime, the Aristide government remains handcuffed by a lack of resources and by the political controversy still swirling around it. In spite of its detailed proposal for resolving Haiti's electoral crisis, submitted last summer to the OAS and subsequently endorsed by that organization, little real progress toward a resolution has been made. As a result, Aristide has been unable to loosen up what is reported as some \$500 million in international development assistance that has been blocked – principally at the behest of the U.S. government – for several years. The opposition coalition – with more allies outside Haiti than inside the country - remains wedded to its position of strident criticism and non-negotiation. In the aftermath of the palace attack and in this continuing atmosphere of political recrimination, prospects for an OAS-brokered solution to the electoral-related problems have darkened, with the latest reports from that organization suggesting that there is increased internal discussion for a more aggressive intervention in Haiti through the application of the Inter-American Democratic Charter adopted last year at the OAS summit in Peru.

And in the midst of it all, Haiti's gunmen continue to lurk in the bushes, awaiting their next chance to wreak more havoc through violence.

Dr. Robert Maguire is Director of Programs in International Affairs at Trinity College in Washington, DC as well as Director of the Trinity College Haiti Program.

