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## Haiti: Trapped in the Titanic

by LADB Staff

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"I've been in here for six years," said Gustave Loiseau as he peered through the bars of the section of the National Penitentiary known as the "Titanic" because it towers over the rest of the antiquated complex. "I came when I was 22. They found drugs in the car. I don't deny it. But all the guys I was with got off, because they had the money to pay bribes." Like more than 80% of the 3,500 men and women in Haiti's prisons, Loiseau has never had a trial. He has spent the past six years in a four-square-meter cell with 20 other inmates and six beds. "You have to pay to get a bed," said Loiseau, who sleeps on the cold concrete floor like most prisoners. Except for a few authorized latrine breaks each day, a plastic bucket and plastic bags serve as a toilet. Inmates say the two meals a day have improved, there is a daily recreation break, and two prison facilities have new computer centers where a lucky few can take classes.

For most, however, life in prison is a matter of waiting. "All I want is to stand before a judge," Loiseau said as he gripped the bars. "Things have improved in Haiti's prisons," said Marie Yolene Gilles, who heads the monitoring program for the nongovernmental National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR). "But if the penitentiary were respecting international norms, everyone would have a bed and there would not be 1,700 people in those buildings."

Last October, the NCHR sent observers into most of the country's prisons and interviewed inmates, officials, and judges. As a result of the group's lobbying, about 500 men and women, most of whom were imprisoned on charges of petty larceny, were released. One man in the National Penitentiary "had been arrested seven years ago on La Gonave Island because he was a stranger in the area," Gilles said. The man, who had never been charged with any crime, was among those released. Except for the Titanic building, where such renowned prisoners as former military dictator Gen. Prosper Avril (1988-90) are housed on the upper floors, the rest of the National Penitentiary was built in the early 1900s.

A new coat of paint covers the crumbling walls, but little has changed for prisoners since then. Most palpable is the overcrowding. More than 100 men are crammed into the chapel, which was built in 1908. Women and children are held across town at the Fort National prison, which, like the rest of the system, violates many international conventions and even Haitian prison regulations. Women who were pregnant when they were imprisoned are now caring for babies within its walls, and about a dozen boys and a half dozen girls are among the inmates.

In February, women's rights organizations learned that a health worker had raped a 17-year-old inmate who had become pregnant and given birth to a child last October. The groups are demanding justice for the girl, who was imprisoned after allegedly stabbing a man who was part of a group attempting to rape her. Haiti has no juvenile detention center. While Haiti's prisons have not been the scene of large riots, like other Latin American penitentiaries, in November 2001 five

prisoners were killed by police who ended a raucous protest against the death of an inmate who had been beaten by a guard.

The NCHR and other observers say the biggest problem is not the prison system itself, but the country's corrupt and inefficient police force and its antiquated and nearly inoperative judicial system. Like Loiseau, many prisoners tell tales of being blackmailed by lawyers, judges, and other officials. Those who cannot pay up can be stuck behind bars for years, while other accused criminals walk free. In an open letter to President Jean-Bertrand Aristide after its "Prisoners Month" campaign last October, the NCHR deplored the fact that high-profile cases such as a 1987 massacre of hundreds of peasants in Jean-Rabel, the murders of two priests in 1994 and 1998, and the 2001 slaying of journalist Jean Dominique (see NotiCen, 2002-11-07) have never been resolved.

In a speech on Jan. 1, Aristide gave a sort of response when he called on the judicial system to move more quickly and said, "The struggle against impunity must continue because social peace and respect for human rights are intertwined." But with political prisoners like Rosemond Jean leader of a group of victims of a credit union scam, who was illegally arrested several months ago still behind bars, many doubt Aristide's promises. National and international human rights groups regularly issue reports charging that Aristide and his government have done little to reduce impunity or human rights violations and crimes, which have sometimes been committed by his partisans.

While Minister of Justice Calixte Delatour recently announced that "2003 will be the year of justice," he is remembered for having collaborated closely with the military regime that staged a coup in 1991, after Aristide was elected president for the first time. During that regime, which remained in power until 1994, between 3,000 and 5,000 people were assassinated, including some of those named in the NCHR letter. Meanwhile, Loiseau and his cellmates are quietly desperate, hoping that occasional visits from reporters and representatives of human rights groups will call attention to their cases.

As Gilles and a journalist recently left the Titanic, a dozen men stretched their long, thin arms through the bars and called out, "Don't forget us!"

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