

2-12-2004

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### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Haiti At The Brink Again." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9167>

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## Haiti At The Brink Again

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Haiti*

*Published: 2004-02-12*

The government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide appears on the verge of collapse as the violence of past months has, by journalistic convention, now become a full-scale insurrection. Opposition forces that began to appear in September and only weeks ago could still be described as "demonstrators" (see NotiCen, 2003-12-11) have now taken significant territory, and the government no longer controls the northern part of the country.

They now own Cap-Haitien, the country's second most important city. The rebels now call themselves the National Reconstruction and Liberation Front. A spokesman for the front, Winter Etienne, said, "The Haitian revolution is on the march. We have decided to no longer live in despair. We will regain our hope for the future." Other opposition parties have distanced themselves from the armed opposition. Socialist Micha Gaillard, a prominent opposition politician, told Agence France Presse, "We distinguish the popular movement we support, demanding the departure of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, from armed rebels with whom we do not identify."

More than 40 people have died, and the international community, including the UN, France, and the Organization of American States (OAS), has called for a halt to the violence. The US has accused the Aristide government of having contributed to the violence but has as yet offered little else. The New York Times, in an editorial, has noted that 14 countries of the Caribbean Community (Caricom) have tried to mediate, "But they lack the kind of authority and influence needed to lead Haiti back from the brink. America alone has that kind of prestige. It must take constructive action, not just drop hints that Mr. Aristide should resign."

The paper specifically recommended American-led police retraining and international supervision of the next elections. Aristide's term still has almost two years remaining. The US has, so far, asked the Aristide government to accept Caricom forces. The request was transmitted to the new Haitian Ambassador to the US Raymond Valcan, who presented his credentials on Feb. 10. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that Secretary of State Colin Powell "pressured" the Haitian government to find a political solution to the crisis. Caricom's efforts have been to suggest to Aristide that he establish clear rules for demonstrations, review the circumstances of arrests, establish an electoral commission, name an independent prime minister, and accept a multinational police force.

Aristide agreed to the recommendations but has not implemented any of them. Boucher said the State Department was "encouraging all parties, including the opposition and the government," to accept the Caricom proposals. On Feb. 11, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said he would send a UN team to Haiti to assess the humanitarian situation. The UN called the situation a "major humanitarian crisis." The US and Canada advised their citizens to leave the country.

On Haiti's border with the Dominican Republic, Dominican army chief Jorge Radhames Sorrilla Ozuna has said that the army has reinforced its presence there to avoid any massive egress of Haitian refugees into his country. There have been reports of Haitians crossing the border asking for refuge and claiming they were being pursued by Aristide's police. Trade between the countries has slowed drastically, shutting down the economy of the Dominican border city Dajabon. The Dominican consul in Cap-Haitien had told his government that roads providing Haitian access to Dajabon have been blocked.

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