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Haiti President Whisked Away

by LADB Staff

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With the departure of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide on Feb. 29, 2004, at about 4:30 a.m. local time, the democratically elected government of Haiti ceased to exist. The 33rd coup in the nation's 200-year history was a *fait accompli*. The next day, it was still unclear to whom the blame or credit belonged. The US was widely suspected.

Despite official denials, the evidence was solid and the witnesses credible that the US had removed the democratically elected president of Haiti without his informed consent. Two days before a US aircraft took President Aristide off the island, "heavily armed" US Marine helicopters were seen within a mile of the National Palace. This happened scant minutes after the president's wife Mildred Aristide was heard live on more than 140 US radio stations, television stations, and the Internet telling Amy Goodman of the daily program Democracy Now, "OK. The situation is quite critical. The thugs and the FRAPH [Front Revolutionnaire pour l'Avancement et le Progres d'Haiti] and the military, which are heavily armed in the north, are sending messages repeatedly on the airways in Haiti that they stand ready at any moment to storm Port-au-Prince. And here in Port-au-Prince, the population has erected I am looking out the window lots of barricades along the streets to prevent an attack. Security is at a heightened situation, but the president's resolve is very strong, as he indicated yesterday and through to this morning that what is important in this moment for Haiti, in terms of the future of Haiti, is to establish the stability and the political stability that Haiti has never had, and for there to be a continuity of governance from one president to the next."

After reiterating in the strongest possible terms that Aristide had no intention of resigning, Mildred Aristide cited the evidence that resignation was about to be heaped upon him. The arms the opposition forces were using and flaunting were far in excess of what could be counted as simply leftover hardware from a previous upheaval. She said, "I know Haiti doesn't produce arms, so it is not home-grown. This is coming from somewhere."

Minutes later, Goodman switched to a live interview with independent journalist Kevin Pina, who gave his location as about a mile and a half from the palace. Pina suddenly interrupted a conversation Goodman was having with US Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) to report, "There are four US military helicopters. I can quite clearly identify them as Marine helicopters. They're circling above me right now. It's not quite clear where they are headed, but they are here and it is heavily armed. Those four military helicopters are heavily armed."

Pina left the show briefly and then returned to report that the opposition, including Evans Paul (see NotiCen, 1999-04-08), the Convergence Democratique (see NotiCen, 2001-01-25), and Le Groupe 184 had said on the radio in Port-au-Prince that the helicopters were there to evacuate the president from the country. But then President Aristide followed, broadcasting a message saying that was not true, Pina recounted. Pina left the hour-long program again and returned with a report of the

possibility that Venezuela might intervene and that the US presence in the skies was aimed at forestalling that eventuality. There was no subsequent confirmation of that.

At the time, Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez was occupied quelling his own opposition's demand for his ouster. Another possibility, that the helicopters were there to protect Aristide and put down the rebellion, also proved not to be the case. The scene that Mildred Aristide had described from her palace window could easily have lent itself to a Marine landing and laying down of a perimeter defense, but that did not happen.

Where is Brazil?

Just the day before, on Feb. 26, the Brazilian government announced it would send troops to Haiti. On Feb. 28, a Brazilian Air Force (Forca Aerea Brasileira, FAB) Hercules plane landed in Port-au-Prince to repatriate 28 Brazilian citizens. The Brazilian Foreign Ministry said the plane landed with two diplomats and 16 naval riflemen aboard. The ministry said the flight had been authorized by President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to evacuate some citizens and support the embassy. Within Brazil, however, there was sentiment for doing more. The newspaper Folha de Sao Paulo, in an example of classic blowback journalism, quoted extensively from an editorial in the US paper The Christian Science Monitor.

Under the headline, Where is Brazil on Haiti, the Monitor queried further, "The sleeping giant aspires to be the region's leader. Why not put boots on the ground in Haiti?" The editorial went on to lay out a scenario for Brazil, saying it shouldn't wait for a buffer force to protect Aristide. It went on, "The Monroe Doctrine, which has let the US treat Latin America as its own backyard, is now ripe for a challenge." But there was no buffer; the situation on the ground was allowed to worsen until the Haitian chief of state was flown away.

The abduction On March 1, Aristide spoke with members of the US Congress and told them that he had not resigned, he had been kidnapped. Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA) said she had received a call from Aristide at 9 a.m. EST, and she said, "He's surrounded by military. It's like he is in jail, he said. He says he was kidnapped." Waters said Aristide told her that US diplomats had threatened him, telling him repeatedly that if he did not leave Haiti, paramilitary leader Guy Philippe would storm the palace and kill him. To make certain he would have no chance of survival, they were withdrawing his security. They were able to do this because Aristide's security guard was privately contracted by a US firm, the Steele Foundation, approved and controlled by the US State Department.

Randall Robinson, an African-American activist and former president of TransAfrica, a Washington lobbying organization, confirmed Water's account. He had also spoken to Aristide and said, "He [Aristide] asked that I tell the world that that it is a coup, that he was abducted by American soldiers and put aboard a plane." Robinson also said Aristide told him he was speaking from a cell phone. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY) also talked with Aristide and had been told "that he was kidnapped, that he resigned under pressure, that he was taken to a Central African country."

The US denies

In a curious shift of context, US denials began with a statement from White House spokesman Scott McClellan, who, rather than acknowledge the source of the kidnapping claim, attributed it to a "conspiracy theory." McClellan said, "Its nonsense, and conspiracy theories do nothing to help the Haitian people move forward to a better, more free, more prosperous future." Follow-up denials were offered by the entire top tier of the US administration, including President George W. Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Vice President Richard Cheney.

By the time the denials had been aired, the US had already landed about 200 marines, troops they had explicitly denied the Aristide government for protection. Instead, they stood fast witnessing mobs of armed young men converging on the palace, randomly firing weapons, and thousands of looters who had poured into the streets. The US troops were later joined by French and Canadian forces. These were authorized by the UN, which, together with the Organization of American States (OAS), did nothing to prevent the dissolution of the existing government. The Marines' mission, should they be given one, will likely be complicated by the breakdown of a reported agreement by which, when Aristide left, rebel forces would lay down their arms.

Far from doing this, rebel leader Philippe told reporters on March 2 that he had declared himself "military chief," and would arrest Prime Minister Yvon Neptune. Little has been seen of the nominal head of the government, Supreme Court Chief Justice Boniface Alexandre, since he was installed as interim leader on Feb. 29, soon after Aristide's departure. Philippe had encouragement for his decision from Marine Col. Dave Berger who told reporters his troops would neither disarm rebels nor police the city. Nor did it seem that the Marines would respond to calls by Amnesty International (AI) for the arrest of former death squad leader-turned-rebel Louis Jodel Chamblain, who had been convicted in absentia of murders, and Jean Pierre Baptiste, also known as Jean Tatoune, who had been given two life sentences for the 1994 massacre of 15 Aristide supporters. This was not to say, however, that the US backed the rebel at the helm of the Haitian ship of state.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said of the development, "the rebels do not have a role in this process." Moreover, he said, "the rebels have to lay down their arms and go home." Lest there be any mistake about US resolve, Roger Noriega, US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, said he thought Philippe "will probably want to make himself scarce." He clarified that Philippe was not scarce yet because "we have sent that message to him; he obviously hasn't received it." To deliver a stronger message, Rumsfeld said that eventually as many as 2,000 marines might go to Haiti, and, with troops from France, Canada, and elsewhere, the number could reach 5,000. The sound of that many boots on the ground woke the sleeping giant.

As Rumsfeld spoke in Washington, Brazil's Minister of Foreign Relations Celso Amorim took to the rostrum in Sao Paulo. Brazilian troops would be sent to join the UN-authorized force, but only in its second, stabilization, phase. Troop numbers would, said the minister, be substantial. Amorim said his country had favored Aristide remaining in power but allowed the prospect of a bloodbath to permit the president's ouster. If the Monroe Doctrine is challenged as The Christian Science

Monitor suggested, it will more likely be by the French than by the countries of the hemisphere that might join the force in Haiti. But, as has been observed by analysts, Brazil has stepped up to fulfill provisions of the OAS Inter-American Democratic Charter that call for Latin American countries to defend democracy.

South America's most powerful nation, flush from a string of successful challenges to US influence that include outflanking the North at the World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial (see NotiSur, 2003-09-18), may be feeling a shift, however subtle, in the North-South balance of power. Given all the provisions of the Democratic Charter, it will be extremely difficult for the UN, the OAS, or the US to recognize the legitimacy of any government in Haiti that was ushered in by the coup.

Still another message came from former Haitian President-for-Life Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. From exile in Paris, he said, "This is my country. I'm ready to put myself at the disposal of the Haitian people." He was last at their disposal in 1986 when, accused of stealing US\$120 million from the national treasury, he fled to France.

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