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## Haiti Interim Government's Legitimacy Under Fire

by LADB Staff

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The exile of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide waxes ever more regionally polarizing. As Aristide touched down in Jamaica to begin a period of temporary exile, the "interim government" of Haiti withdrew its ambassador from Jamaica. Aristide flew into Jamaica from the Central African Republic (CAR), to which he insists he was taken against his will by the US (see NotiCen, 2004-03-04). The US government denies his allegations, but evidence of a kidnapping continues to grow.

Doubt as to the legitimacy of the installed Haitian government also is growing. A series of agonizing twists of logic have left more than one official of more than one government in amazement and confusion, as the "international community" plays fast and loose with the concepts of sovereignty and democracy.

Jamaica's Foreign Minister K.D. Knight said he was surprised that Aristide was made to await a decision by the titular head of the CAR government, Gen. Francois Bozize, as to whether he would even be allowed to leave the CAR. "I find that quite strange," he said. "I didn't apprehend there would be any difficulty. I would believe that any delay would be over flight plans."

The delay was not about flight plans. It was, according to witnesses, about negotiating Aristide's release, and, by extension, it lent credibility to Aristide's contention that he was kidnapped. The word kidnapped becomes important in light of the fact that kidnapping is a crime, whereas other phrases used by governments to explain their participation in the president's forced departure were deliberately sanitized descriptions that carried with them de facto immunity from the reach of international law. Aristide was accompanied on the 17-hour plane trip by Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson's personal emissary, Member of Parliament Sharon Hay-Webster, as well as by two reporters.

Aristide said Bozize, who assumed his presidency by coup two years ago, was confused about whether he could allow Aristide to leave. That is to say, the president of the sovereign nation of the Central African Republic did not seem to know whether he had in Aristide an exile or a prisoner. Aristide said Bozize had to consult with officials from France, the US, and Gabon the countries involved in Aristide's departure from his homeland and arrival in mid-Africa on Feb. 29.

US criticizes criticism Prime Minister Patterson is current chair of the 15-nation Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and he was also confused by the circumstances under which President Aristide was deprived of his country. He has called for an international investigation into the matter, a call echoed last week by the 53-nation African Union. Rather than answer the questions, the US offered criticism of Jamaica for hosting Aristide.

Said US Ambassador to Haiti James Foley, "Jamaican authorities are certainly taking on a risk and a responsibility [by accepting Aristide]." Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Richard Myers said, "As far as Aristide's return to the region is concerned, if that increases the violence here, then that would be extremely unhelpful." The US, besides having taken Aristide from home and removed him from office, has also installed a new prime minister, Gerard Latortue, a move the Caribbean Community reluctantly accepted but not before branding the manipulation of government a "dangerous precedent."

Latortue called Jamaica's decision to accept Aristide for ten weeks an "unfriendly act," for which he retaliated with an unfriendly act of his own, the recall of the Haitian ambassador to Jamaica, putting diplomatic relations with its neighbor on hold. Latortue said Aristide's return to the region could threaten a "fragile stability."

US officials at the highest level, who had previously denied forcing Aristide's departure, have stuck with their story about Aristide's departure. US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice told NBC, "We believe that President Aristide, in a sense, forfeited his ability to lead his people, because he did not govern democratically."

Said Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to CNN the day before Aristide arrived in Jamaica, "The hope is that he will not come back into the hemisphere and complicate the situation." But Rumsfeld's hope was dashed with Aristide's arrival in Jamaica. The mission to return him to the region, reportedly organized by US Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA), Randall Robinson, former president of TransAfrica Forum, and Ira Kurzban, Aristide's attorney, was successful.

As he had while en route into exile, Aristide continued to call his departure "a coup and a modern-day kidnapping" carried out by the US. But this time he gave more detail. Much more importantly, this time he had corroboration. Aristide said that he had been conferring with US Ambassador Foley about ways of avoiding violence and bloodshed in Port-au-Prince on Feb. 28.

Foley told Aristide that he should go with a US escort to a location where he could appear on television to appeal for calm. "I wanted to talk to the press, as I did the night before for more than one hour and a half, talking to the people through national TV," said Aristide. "This was my responsibility. And I could do it again and again each time as was necessary." The Haitian president said that he left in a car with the US personnel, who said they could provide security, but instead of taking him to meet with news media, "we went straight to the plane," a white aircraft unmarked but for a US flag. He was then obliged to board, followed by US troops in combat gear, who changed to civilian clothes once on the plane. Also aboard were 19 members of Aristide's US-contracted security guard.

It was a member of the US security guard who supported and corroborated Aristide's account, although he would not give his name to the media. Also witnessing Aristide's account was an aide and pilot for Aristide, Franz Gabriel, who said, "I was at the house at five a.m. when Moreno came in to tell the president they were going to organize a press conference and be ready to accompany them. We boarded to go to the embassy, and we ended up at the airport. That's what Mr. Moreno wanted him to do." Luis Moreno is deputy chief of the US Embassy in Port-au-Prince.

The security guard who would not be named said that the security warning given Aristide was a trick to get him to go along. "That was just bogus. It's a story they fabricated," he said.

In the US Congress, some members, including Waters, are seeking an investigation that will go beyond administration denials in clarifying the US role in the removal of Aristide. Said Waters, "I worked with some of my friends to help the United States avoid this confrontation that took place in Haiti. You know, the devastating understanding that my own government was involved in helping to foster the confrontation that eventually led to the coup d'etat has been quite overwhelming."

CARICOM, under Patterson's chairmanship, has also called for an investigation into Aristide's charge that the US abducted him. Steadfast in its denial, the US State Department, through spokesman Adam Ereli, declined to acknowledge Aristide's office, claiming instead that even his presence in the region "does not serve a useful purpose. But he's here. He's on a private visit. And he's here temporarily as a former president of Haiti."

Further negation of Aristide's presidency came from interim Prime Minister Latortue, who, having freshly suspended Haiti's membership in CARICOM, gathered politicians around him to name Cabinet ministers. Under a US-backed plan, he was to have chosen both members of the opposition and members of Aristide's La Fanmi Lavalas party, but as of March 16 he had only chosen opposition leaders. Of 13 offices, 11 have gone to the occupation government.

## *Hammering legitimacy*

The legitimacy of Latortue's government remains in grave doubt. The interim prime minister suspended Haiti's membership in CARICOM only after the organization announced it would decide at a summit later in March whether to recognize him and his rule. Prospects for regional recognition first dimmed with a statement from Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, who said, "We don't recognize Haiti's new government. The president of Haiti is named Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and he was elected by his people."

Venezuela is not a member of CARICOM, but it is the country to which Aristide fled in 1991 after the first coup, and Chavez offered Aristide asylum again this time. Venezuela has asked for the Organization of American States (OAS) to investigate the circumstances of Aristide's removal. Venezuelan Ambassador to the OAS Jorge Valero scolded the Consejo Permanente of the organization for its "inhibition and incompetence" in its handling of the matter and proposed a new resolution supporting CARICOM. Under this resolution, the OAS would ask the UN Security Council to investigate the removal of Aristide.

Valero also took the OAS to task for failing to invoke the Democratic Charter and for failing to convoke a meeting of the Consejo Permanente to deal with the issue. He said, "The Venezuelan government expects that, in an urgent manner, the Consejo Permanente of the OAS meet, with the objective of considering and adopting needed measures in the face of the grave situation of political instability and constitutional rupture in Haiti."

A further blow to pretensions of legitimacy, coinciding in time with the Chavez declaration, came on March 16, when the Jamaican Foreign Relations Ministry issued a communique saying that Kingston would not recognize the interim Haitian government "because the Caribbean Community still has not done so." Most damning, however, was the outcry against the installed regime in Haiti itself.

Opposition politician Mischa Gaillard said on Radio Vision 2000, "You cannot call this a government of national unity." No members of his Convergence Democratique coalition of political parties and civic groups were in the new Cabinet. On the other side of Haiti's political street, Aristide's Prime Minister Yvon Neptune said, "There should at least be a sincere expression of accepting Lavalas as an organization. The plan was to try to set the stage for reconciliation." Neptune resigned March 10, after assurances from Latortue, who pledged to include Lavalas, the party with the largest following in the country.

Meanwhile, Haiti remains an occupied country. Said Wilgo Supreme Ebouard, leader of a group in Belair, a poor slum stronghold of Aristide support, "Belair is not Kosovo or Iraq, or Chechnya. We are not terrorists. We are just poor people who want to live a normal life." Haiti is none of those countries, but it is beginning to resemble post-World War II Berlin. Major Xavier Pons, a French military spokesman, said the allies plan to divide the country into sectors, with a sector going to each of the occupying countries, France, the US, Chile, and Canada.

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