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CARICOM Denies Recognition of Haiti Regime

by LADB Staff

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Caribbean Community (Caricom) leaders bore up under tremendous pressure to withhold recognition of Haiti's US-installed interim government at a March 27 meeting in St. Kitts. They said they would take the matter up again at a July summit in Granada but wanted a UN investigation of the circumstances of the ouster of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide first (see NotiCen, 2004-03-18).

Calling the discussions "quite tense," Trinidad and Tobago Prime Minister Patrick Manning told reporters, "We can't determine this issue at this meeting." Other officials said the US pressure was "enormous" to recognize the government it appointed after spiriting Aristide from Haiti on Feb. 29 (see NotiCen, 2004-03-04). "Right now we are not satisfied," St. Vincent and the Grenadines Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves said. "We are going to watch and see a number of things as they evolve." The leaders of the 15 Caribbean nations that comprise Caricom rejected claims by Gerard Latortue, the man installed as prime minister of Haiti, that the people who toppled the democratically elected Aristide government were "freedom fighters." They also lamented Latortue's withdrawal of Haiti from Caricom for its support of bringing Aristide to Jamaica from the Central African Republic, where he was taken against his will, according to witnesses and first-hand accounts.

Can't trust the Security Council

The 11 heads of government who attended the meeting said it was in the "compelling interest of the international community" to fully investigate the circumstances of Aristide's departure, and they would ask the UN General Assembly or Secretary-General Kofi Annan to oversee an inquiry into the specific charge made by Aristide that he was abducted by US agents. They specified the General Assembly rather than the Security Council because the latter body is subject to veto by permanent members the US and France, both of which have troops in Haiti lending authority to Latortue. Caricom wants quick "free and fair elections to ensure a return to constitutional democracy in an acceptable time frame," an indication that it might be willing to accept the fall of the Aristide presidency.

In the meantime, said Denzil Douglas, prime minister of St. Kitts and Nevis, Caricom plans to deal directly with "the Haitian people through the UN and other agencies," but it will not send troops to participate in the US-led force currently occupying the country because the Security Council denied its plea to send troops in time to save the legitimate government. Manning, however, said Trinidad would send soldiers to join a separate UN humanitarian force within 60 days, and other Caricom countries are expected to do likewise. While France and the US are thought to be equally suspect because of their Security Council positions, their troops behave, and are seen, radically differently in Haiti.

Both forces are armed, but the French move about in berets, while US troops are helmeted. French troops mingle easily with the population, better able to communicate with the French- and Creole-speaking Haitians. For the French, the country is a former colony, and they feel at home, particularly in Cap-Hatien, a colonial city with French architecture. Among the indications that the feeling is shared, the standouts are that French troops have never fired a shot in Haiti and have not been shot at; the US force has already shot and killed at least 6 Haitians, whom they claim fired upon them or ran roadblocks.

France is undeniably more comfortable with Aristide gone. One of the Haitian president's pet projects was restitution from France of 90 million gold francs that France made Haiti pay for its independence. France claimed the money was to compensate former plantation owners. After declaring independence on Jan. 1, 1804, Haiti became the world's first free black republic. But France did not recognize the independent country until 1838, after Haiti began paying. The payments continued into the 20th century, and it was on the forced payment of that debt that Aristide blamed today's grinding Haitian poverty.

This history, and restitution, is not lost on the Haitian in the street. "They made us into slaves, but we fought and eventually kicked them out," Job Denis, who fixes flat tires, told a reporter. "But then they made us pay for our independence. They owe us that money and it should go to each and every Haitian."

French troops are mindful of the legacy as well. "There should be no links between 1804 and 2004, but we are sensitive to Haitians being proud of this history. That's why we've slowly increased our presence, and we've been very tactful in our approach," said French military spokesman Maj. Xavier Pons. Latortue has abandoned the idea of restitution in favor of trying to get hundreds of millions of dollars in suspended international aid restored. France has denied the debt, claiming to have lent more than US\$240 million in aid to Haiti.

Latortue is distancing himself from Aristide's policies, but not from his administration. He is reportedly barring dozens of members of the government from leaving the country, including Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, ex-police chief Joceyne Pierre, and Rene Civil, a founding member of Aristide's party. Bernard Gousse, named justice minister by Latortue, called the suspension of the right to travel "an insurance policy" in the event of investigations into embezzlement and other crimes alleged against the ousted government. So far, 37 officials have been denied exit, including the former head of the central bank.

At the same time, rebels convicted of murdering Aristide supporters remain free. Louis Jodel Chamblain is one of those. Convicted of murder and accused of heading death squads in the 1980s and 1990s, he returned from exile in the Dominican Republic to lead the February rebellion. He now roams freely, unhindered by the US-dominated multinational UN force or by the Haitian National Police, whose new chief, Leon Charles, says arresting Chamblain is "over my head." Chamblain claims to have 15,000 to 20,000 armed fighters at his disposal.

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