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Haiti: Update On Haitian Political Crisis

by Erika Harding

Category/Department: General

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June 30: In a statement released Tuesday, the Organization of American States (OAS) announced plans to set up an intelligence unit to track violations of the hemisphere-wide trade embargo against Haiti. The OAS policy was decided after the military coup last September. OAS Secretary General Joao Baena Soares expressed confidence that deposed president Jean Bertrand Aristide would be reinstated, and said the activist Roman Catholic priest was willing to negotiate his way back to power. Baena Soares also released the names of French and Dutch companies he claimed were among the chief violators of the embargo, and cited several recent oil shipments, including one by a Bahamas-registered tanker. Marc Bazin, appointed by Haiti's legislature as the new prime minister, has said he was willing to negotiate with Aristide, who says he considers Bazin's appointment illegal. (See NotiSur 06/30/92 for recent coverage on Bazin appointment and related topics.) State Department spokesperson Joe Snyder rejected a report by Americas Watch charging that Washington has issued misleading information about the forced deportation of Haitian refugees seeking asylum in the US. The report mentioned a study conducted by the State Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) which asserts that repatriated Haitians have not faced repression upon their return to Haiti. The study claims that 2,300 repatriated Haitians who were interviewed by US officials denied having experienced any kind of political repression at the hands of the Haitian government and supporters. Americas Watch said the sample in the study was unrepresentative, since a total 17,000 Haitians have been forcibly deported, and many are too afraid to go to public places for fear of reprisal. The interviews were conducted in public. Snyder said US Embassy officials had covered 12,000 miles throughout the island to locate repatriated refugees and interview them. He added, "We used neutral places to do the interviews, like churches, schools, and the premises of humanitarian organisations." The spokesperson also denied allegations by Americas Watch that US officials spent less than five minutes interviewing each refugee. He said the interviews "usually lasted twenty minutes." During a speech in Port of Spain (Trinidad & Tobago), Aristide criticized the Vatican for supporting the military-backed government in Haiti. He said, "I want to ask the question of the pope: How would he have acted if it Poland were taken over by the military and if the military had taken the lives of 2,000 people?" The US Coast Guard returned 11 refugees to Haiti. Petty Officer Steve Sapp, a spokesperson in Miami, said regular refugee patrols have been suspended following a sharp decline in the number of people fleeing Haiti. According to Sapp, June 5 was the last time the Coast Guard picked up Haitians at sea. July 3: Following a three-day meeting in Miami with his closest allies, Aristide called for an immediate dialogue "on Haitian soil" with every important group in Haiti, with the exception of Bazin and his government. Aristide named a commission to begin talks within a month with the army as well as groups representing churches, business, peasants, unions, political parties, humanitarian organizations and human rights monitors. Aristide's proposal requested that the OAS and the UN take an active role leading to his return, including the deployment of OAS personnel before the talks begin to ensure respect for human rights and democratic institutions. Catholic priest Antoine Adrien, an Aristide adviser who attended the meeting, said, "Everybody knows [Bazin] is only a puppet of the army. Simply, he is not in charge. It would be political stupidity to negotiate with Bazin. Nonsense!" In a July 3 interview published in the The Miami Herald (07/04/92), Aristide said he is "prepared to go to Haiti

at any time." He added that he intends to talk to the current Haitian government if all members of Haitian society can participate in the negotiations. Aristide said he does not expect military chief Raoul Cedras and other members of the de facto government to go along with the plan. He also said he will not negotiate personally with Bazin. The Herald quoted an anonymous senior State Department official as saying that the conference in Miami was apparently Aristide's response to criticism by Washington and the OAS that he has not been trying hard enough to negotiate a solution. The official added that Aristide has maintained positions that have damaged prospects for negotiations in the past, such as refusing to deal with Bazin, and demanding that Cedras resign. July 4: The Washington Post reported that Washington's new policy since early June is to press Aristide and Bazin to resolve the political crisis. US Customs agents and the Treasury Department, acting on an executive order by President Bush, have tightened enforcement of the trade embargo searching vessels bound to and from Haiti, seizing contraband and pressing international shipping firms not to do business with Haiti. While merchandise of all descriptions is still reaching the country, the US action has sent already high prices skyrocketing, raised social tensions and left Bazin with little room to maneuver. Unidentified US officials cited by the Post said the State Department has pressed Aristide to bargain with Bazin, and dropped hints that if he passes up this "important window of opportunity," Washington may drop or ease the embargo. Bazin has not recognized Aristide as president, but has offered to meet him "anytime, anywhere" to defuse Haiti's crisis. In an interview with the Post, Bazin said his mandate is to "create a climate...of detente which will ultimately lead to reconciliation...I have to get [Aristide] to accept me as a bona fide broker" between the ousted president and the army. Bazin is a conservative from a wealthy family who spent much of his life in Europe and the United States. He speaks fluent French and English, but is awkward in Creole, the language of the nation's poor majority. His support comes mainly from Haiti's tiny aristocracy. Aristide, 38, an orphan raised in poverty by Catholic priests, became a priest who espoused radical liberation theology and was expelled from his order for preaching class warfare before he entered politics in 1990. As a public speaker in Creole, he is described as mesmerizing. He used sermons to denounce the US, Haiti's wealthy elite and the army. He is backed by the masses of peasants and urban poor. July 6: In a speech broadcast on nationwide TV and radio, Bazin said holding negotiations in Santo Domingo constituted the "only serious proposal" of many offered to resolve the political crisis. The site was proposed by Dominican President Joaquin Balaguer. Bazin said he hoped the OAS would "associate itself" with the proposed meetings. The prime minister promised to guarantee press freedoms and civil rights. Aristide advisers told reporters that he would meet with Bazin if the latter presents himself as a political party leader. Aristide has asserted that Bazin's post as prime minister is unconstitutional. (Sources: Notimex, Associated Press, Inter Press Service, 06/30/92; United Press International, 06/30/92; Washington Post, 07/04/92; Spanish news service EFE, 06/30/92, 07/04/92, 07/05/92; Agence France- Presse, 07/03/92, 07/06/92)

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