8-30-2012

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Haiti’s History of Paramilitary Squads Continues, Only This Time Haitians Could Back Group Demanding New Armed Forces

by George Rodriguez
Category/Department: Haiti
Published: 2012-08-30

Haiti’s complex internal-security situation has been stirred by the bold surfacing of a paramilitary group, an actual irregular army that is demanding that the Haitian armed forces—disbanded but not constitutionally abolished in 1995—be reinstated.

Paramilitary squads are nothing new to Haiti—or to other Caribbean and Latin American nations, for that matter—where, as instruments of state terror, they are dreaded for their viciousness, their utter lack of respect for human rights, their impunity.

Dictators such as the Duvaliers—both François "Papa Doc" (1957-1971), who became president for life in 1964, and Jean-Bertrand "Baby Doc" (1971-1986), who was overthrown by a popular uprising, ruled using terror squads (NotiSur, Jan. 8, 1991).

Created in 1959 by Papa Doc, the Tonton Macoutes (Haitian Creole for uncle bogeyman) came to life because of the senior Duvalier’s fear that, after an attempted coup a year into his ruthless and corrupt régime, the military could eventually succeed in overthrowing him. Tonton Macoute is a Haitian mythological character who kidnaps children he catches in a burlap bag and later eats them.

Armed with firearms and machetes, the paramilitary squad assembled by the elder Duvalier was the dictator’s instrument for maintaining the reign of terror in which opponents would disappear, mostly during the night but even during the day, to be tortured—sometimes stoned or burned alive (NotiSur, July 28, 1987).

The Macoutes were officially renamed as the Milice de Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale (MVSN).

Successor Baby Doc kept his father’s state-terror creation going, and there was a period during which Macoute-related squads popped up even after the second Duvalier was toppled.


**Bold paramilitary group operates openly**

Now, a new paramilitary organization has entered the complex security-political scene. It is estimated to number some 3,000 troops, a figure group leaders place at 15,000—and even more—and, early this year, the organization began occupying old, unused military installations.

Whatever their number, members of this de facto army have marched down Port-au-Prince streets and around rural areas, carrying a variety of weapons, despite the presence of forces of the Mission
des Nations Unies pour la stabilsation en Haïti (MINUSTAH)—the UN peacekeeping force in this French-speaking Caribbean nation (NotiCen, Aug. 9, 2007)—and the Police Nationale d’Haïti (PNd’H).

Among its boldest actions, approximately 50 members of the group—some armed—forced their way into a meeting of Haiti’s Parliament in April, to demand the immediate ratification of Laurent Lamothe’s appointment as the country’s prime minister—which occurred May 4.

Several lawmakers reacted by criticizing Haitian President Michel Martelly’s inaction in curbing such groups. "Democracy is in danger," warned Sen. Andrice Riché. "No paramilitary force could exist in [Haitian] territory without the complicity, tolerance, and the blessing of those in power."

Also, during this year’s May 18 Flag Day celebration, paramilitary militia paraded through the capital, an event that led to violence when members of the group began throwing stones at MINUSTAH forces, who retaliated by firing tear-gas canisters into the crowd and making arrests among the marchers.

MINUSTAH is a key player in the Haitian security scene, as its presence, which began in 2004, is widely resented by the population. Some MINUSTAH personnel have been charged with, and some convicted of, rape and have carried out violent operations in neighborhoods in the capital, including the densely populated and extremely impoverished Cité Soleil, bordering the Toussaint Louverture International Airport.

Nepalese MINUSTAH troops are suspected of having started last year’s cholera outbreak (NotiCen, Nov. 18, 2010) in this country where 78% of its 9.7 million people somehow survive on less than US$2 a day.

Presidential aide Georges Michel, quoted by the newspaper The Guardian, said the paramilitary are more popular than MINUSTAH. "The people are with them," said Michel. "It would be a major catastrophe for President Michel Martelly (NotiCen, April 28, 2011) if he calls upon MINUSTAH to crack down on them [the irregular militia]. They will be seen as heroes and Martelly as the villain. So, a peaceful and political solution must be found."

Michel was referring the group’s repeated refusal to follow orders from Martelly—a former musician also known by his artistic name "Sweet Micky"—to lay down their guns, because, as a member of the militia said, "We’re military."

And, as another group member told the BBC, "The UN hasn’t looked after Haiti. They’ve only killed more people. We will do a better job of caring for our own."

In a report issued June 29 by the independent Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), research associate Carla Hinson said that "Martelly met with members of the paramilitary group during his campaign to discuss the future of the military, and they were initially optimistic about Martelly’s proposed military strategy. Original members of the group quietly began to train unofficially upon Martelly’s inauguration."

But "Martelly’s present design will continue to delay the re-establishment of the armed forces for at least a few more years, and the proposed military will widely exclude members of the rogue group," Hinson wrote. "The Haitian government’s estimated 2011-2012 budget of 119.8 billion gourds—US$3 billion—does not have room for military funding...even if Martelly does secure international
approval and funding for the reconstitution of such a historically controversial body, these members
will be dissatisfied with their exclusion from the legal military."

The Forces Armées d’Haïti were demobilized in 1995 (NotiSur, Feb. 16, 1996), during Aristide’s
second of three brief presidential terms, but the nation’s Constitution has not been amended to
formally abolish them. Within this context, Haiti’s security forces are now its police and its Coast
Guard (Commissariat des Gardes-Côtes, CGC), which is part of the police, and the country relies
heavily on MINUSTAH, as discredited as it may be.

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