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Police Station Attacked as Haiti’s Political Crisis Escalates

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A new actor has made its way into the ongoing political crisis that has kept Haiti in an institutional limbo for months: commando violence.

About two hours after midnight on May 16, approximately 50 gunmen dressed in green military-style fatigues stormed a police station, battered several of the officers, and stole several weapons plus ammunition, according to official accounts and to media reports. The attack took place in the coastal city of Les Cayes, the capital of the South Province (Département du Sud) some 160 kilometers southwest of Port-au-Prince, the country’s capital.

In statements a few hours after the incident, Commissioner Frantz Lerebours, spokesperson for Haiti’s National Police (Police Nationale d’Haïti, PNH), told reporters that one officer and one gunman had been killed during the attack, and that three other assailants had died as their speeding getaway van swerved off the road and fell into a ravine.

Several commandos who survived the attack and the accident were arrested, while an unknown number of assailants managed to escape, he added.

In a separate statement, Sud Police Chief Luc Pierre said, “Gunmen in military fatigues attacked police headquarters around 2:30 a.m.; they beat several police officers and took away a number of weapons.” He added that the stolen arsenal included automatic weapons.

And Les Cayes Chief Police Inspector Octave Jean, who pointed out that the attackers actually tortured several officers, admitted, “We were caught off guard.” He said that an investigation was underway, and assured the public that such an event “would not happen again.”

“These are guys who have been recruited to create trouble,” Jean said.

Top authorities from the government and the National Police Superior Council, (Conseil Supérieur de la Police Nationale, CSPN) held a joint emergency meeting a few hours after the attack, and the interim administration, headed by Jocelerme Privert, after condemning the attack “in the strongest terms,” announced that it was providing resources for those responsible to be brought before justice.

Shortly after the incident, in statements to reporters, one of the captured commandos, identified as Remy Teleus, pointed to ex paramilitary leader Guy Philippe as responsible for the attack—and unveiled what seems to be a destabilization plan.

“I was not among those who stormed the police headquarters, but I am part of a group commissioned by Guy Philippe to take over police headquarters,” he said.

According to the Haiti Sentinel, “the badly beaten attacker had cited ... Guy Philippe as the author of the terrorist assault, saying he participated in a meeting with Philippe on the eve [of the attack].”
Incidents ‘politically motivated’

But in statements to reporters on May 24, Philippe’s attorney, Reynold Georges, denied the former paramilitary leader’s part in the attack, dismissing the accusations as baseless. He said the government was persecuting Philippe, and argued that attempts to involve him in the incident were “politically motivated.” The government did not reply to the lawyer's statements.

Philippe is best known for having led the 2004 coup that toppled former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991-1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004) (NotiCen, March 4, 2004). But in the United States, he is also well known to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), which has issued a warrant for his arrest on drug-trafficking charges and has tried to capture him at least twice.

Philippe has also been accused by Human Rights Watch of being a paramilitary squad leader. Among other official activities, he headed the PNH in the capital suburb of Delmas (1997-1999) and in the northern coastal city of Cap-Haïtien (1999-2000). Accused in 2001 of having masterminded an attack on the Police Academy, he escaped to the neighboring Dominican Republic. Three years later, on Feb. 9, 2004, he returned to Haiti to help topple Aristide. Within five days, he was in command of the rebel troops—the Front pour la Reconstruction Nationale, FRN)—involved in the coup.

As soon as the FNR became a political party 2005, Philippe announced he would run in the following year’s presidential election as the group’s candidate. He was a senatorial candidate in last year’s parliamentary elections.

Philippe has been critical of the authorities involved in Haiti’s ongoing political crisis.

The October 2015 presidential election has been followed by a series of postponements to the required runoff vote between the two top candidates—from the originally scheduled Dec. 27, to Jan. 17, Jan. 24, April 24, and now, perhaps, until October. After the much-criticized President Michel “Sweet Micky” Martelly stepped down at the end of his term on Feb. 7, a provisional government was installed. It was originally scheduled to be in office for 120 days. (NotiCen, Jan. 14, 2016, March 3, 2016, April 21, 2016, and May 5, 2016).

Threats of internal war

In January, Philippe began to threaten with internal war if the runoff vote was delayed and a provisional government that did not represent the country’s provinces was put in power.

“We are ready for war,” he said in a statement issued Jan. 24 in which he also called on Haitians to fight against the “anarchists”—his words for the country’s political leadership—in Port-au-Prince. “Once again, the Republic of Port-au-Prince dictated to the rest of the country what it wants. We know that in the last election there were some irregularities... It is necessary that the law be respected. The law says that the only way to replace a president is if a president resigns or if the president is in mental or physical disability,” he said, adding that neither case applied now.

“It is my duty to say that the country is in danger, and it is my duty to make arrangements... No transitional government ... will help it, save it,” he added. “These are ... criminals who want to take power without legitimacy... From Feb. 7, we in the Grand’Anse will not accept any order of an illegitimate and illegal government.” Grand’Anse is the southwestern province where he was born.
In the statement, he stressed that should there be need to set up a transitional government, it must include provincial representation, since “we will not let five or six people in Port-au-Prince” decide for the entire population… I would ask all my supporters, all my soldiers, to join me. I need their help, not to make a mess. We are revolutionaries. I am a revolutionary, but I am not an anarchist. We will not burn schools, vehicles, but we will not take their diktat under pressure.”

And he warned, “I, Guy Philippe, I will stand before them, I will not accept them, I will not receive orders from them.”

In a later message—marking the 12th anniversary of the 2004 coup, Philippe accused Privert of planning to remain in power, and warned against what he described as a “plan to bring the country directly into a civil war. He called on former soldiers to be vigilant.

During Aristide’s presidency, the Haitian Army was abolished. While president, Martelly (2012-2016) stated he favored reinstating the military, basically to protect Haiti’s coastline, which stretches over some 1,700 kilometers, and its 376-kilometer land border with the Dominican Republic.

Former Haitian soldiers have been involved in violent incidents this year. In February, ex troopers, armed and wearing green uniforms, clashed with anti-Martelly demonstrators in Por-Au-Prince, resulting in the mob-killing of a former soldier.

Early this month, a group of mostly young men wearing green uniforms, demonstrated in front of the Defense Ministry, blocking its entrance, demanding border protection action.

“There are people who are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice if necessary,” Philippe warned.

Shortly after, in a television interview in the southwestern city of Pestel—his hometown and stronghold in Grand’Anse—Philippe said, “Privert has no choice; he must organize elections, or he must leave power May 14.”

On March 7, he told Radio Télévision Hirondelle, “We have seen that from the start … Mr. Privert would like to hold on to power,” and called on “all authentic Haitians, Haitians who love their country, patriots, to prepare themselves to defend Haiti if necessary.” And he added, “If [Privert] is stubborn, if he really wants to hold on to power, I believe we’re heading directly toward a civil war. That’s not what I want, but it’s my assessment.”

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