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Haiti: Summary Of Developments On Attempted Coup

by Barbara Khol

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Jan. 7: At 12:45 a.m. local time, Roger Lafontant, former head of the Duvalierist Tonton Macoutes, proclaimed himself president. Provisional president Ertha Pascal Trouillot read a resignation message over Radio Nacional prior to Lafontant's announcement. Speaking from the palace, Pascal-Trouillot said: "The armed forces have done their utmost to protect life and property and maintain law and order," but "government has become impossible to run...For the happiness of this land that all of us love dearly, I am forced to resign as provisional president." Lafontant, who served as interior and defense minister under Duvalier, returned in summer 1990 after five years' exile in the Dominican Republic. He was barred from candidacy in the presidential race in December. Lafontant appeared on state-run television shortly after the radio announcement and said he had acted "in association with the armed forces." He said he was outraged by the election, which he called a "masquerade" and a "scathing insult." The coup commenced with gunfire in the presidential palace area at about 10:00 p.m. Sunday evening. AFP quoted military sources as saying that a military rebellion broke out in Port-au-Prince, with the occupation of the Dessalines barracks by army infantry units. The sources said the rebels wanted to express opposition to transfers of military personnel to the interior as decreed by the high command. Next, AFP cited unidentified military sources as saying that army chief Gen. Herard Abraham and other leading generals condemned the coup. Early Monday, Gen. Abraham met with unit commanders in Port-au-Prince to organize loyalist soldiers for reversing the coup. The general described Lafontant's action as a "mutiny," rather than a coup. The sources said Lafontant supporters of Lafontant were holding military personnel hostage inside the presidential palace. According to a report by the Associated Press, the significance of the shooting "could not be immediately determined and there were no reports of injuries." President-elect Jean-Bertrand Aristides was reported safe. His inauguration is scheduled for Feb. 7, the fifth anniversary of the fall of Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier. Independent Radio Metropole reported that armored personnel carriers were seen on the streets. According to Notimex, the coup was led by former colonels Leonze Qualo and Himmler Rebu. Qualo served as assistant armed forces commander-in-chief during the Duvalierist era, and Rebu is a former commander of the Leopard battalion, headquartered near the national palace. Both men were ousted in April 1989 following a failed coup against former provisional president Gen. Prosper Avril. In Washington, Haiti's Ambassador to the US, Raymond Joseph, said reports about a successful military coup were "false." He asserted that loyalist troops would bring the situation under control without the next few hours. Before dawn, protesters shouting "Long live Aristide, down with Lafontant" took to the streets in some sections of Port-au-Prince, and erected flaming barricades. An unidentified witness cited by AP said the protesters plundered the suburban house of a Lafontant supporter. In Washington, State Department spokesperson David Denny said Pascal-Trouillot was being held hostage by Lafontant. He said, "We emphatically condemn this assault on President Trouillot and this attempt to overthrow the constitutional government of Haiti. We will provide no support to nor conduct normal relations with any government of Haiti that comes to power by unconstitutional means." By Monday afternoon, Gen. Abraham's forces had put down the coup. According to Spanish news service, EFE, at least nine persons were killed, and unofficial sources estimated that the number may be over 30. Lafontant and his military and civilian followers described as

"linked to the Tonton Macoutes" were arrested, and taken to armed forces headquarters near the presidential palace. Detained persons included Marjorie Robins, Lafontant's press secretary; former deputy Alphonse Lahens; Serge Auguste; Hendrick Louis; Marius Paul; Gerard Leon; and, Serge Conille. The corpses of seven persons, victims of summary executions, were seen on the Jean Jacques Dessalines Avenue on Monday afternoon. Radio reports indicated that another two persons had been killed in clashes outside the capital city. One of the victims, stoned to death in Carrefour municipality (south of Port-au-Prince), was a cousin to Lafontant. AFP reported that with the discovery of the corpses of five Lafontant supporters outside URN headquarters in the capital, the death toll had reached 21. The French news service said that Lafontant and 15 other persons had led the coup. Lafontant appeared before television cameras in handcuffs. Soldiers rescued the Duvalierist leader from the hands of a mob intent on killing him, and setting fire to his remains. In a later report, AP said at least 34 people died in street violence during the coup attempt. State-run radio reported that 26 were killed in a shootout at the URN headquarters. Radio Metropole reported the lynching of at least seven Duvalier supporters by protesters. Before LaFontant's arrest, protesters staged violent demonstrations that left up to eight people dead, Radio Metropole said. Notimex said unconfirmed reports indicated that former Tonton Macoutes were burned to death in public places. Radio Metropole reported that homes of persons linked to Lafontant or the Duvalier regime were looted. Among the looting victims were Port-au-Prince Archbishop Francois Wolf Ligonde, and the vice president of the National Reconciliation Union (URN), a political party headed by Lafontant. In his News Years Day sermon, Msgr. Ligonde asserted that former priest Aristide, a supporter of liberation theology, plans to lead the country into totalitarianism. Demonstrators also reportedly set fire to the capital city's cathedral. Notimex reported that the home of former presidential candidate Hubert de Ronceray, leader of the Duvalierist Mobilization for National Development (MDN), was destroyed by fire. In a public statement, de Ronceray had said he was supportive of Lafontant to "save the country from chaos." In San Juan, Puerto Rico, exiled Haitian political leader Paul Latortue told reporters that president-elect Aristide was "safe and sound" at an undisclosed location in Port-au-Prince. [Lafontant commenced his political career as a medical student when he helped Duvalier's father, Francois (Papa Doc), crush a student-led strike. He formed a student unit of the Tonton Macoutes and continued to be associated with the infamous militia throughout his career. In the 1970s, Jean-Claude Duvalier appointed Lafontant consul general in Montreal and then in New York. A recent report by the National Coalition for Haitian Refugees and Americas Watch said he used those positions to spy on opposition activists. He is believed to have headed the Tonton Macoutes from 1979 to 1980, and was later a member of the notorious political police force known as the Detective Service. Lafontant also served as a special security adviser to "Baby Doc" Duvalier.] (Basic data from several reports by AP, AFP, EFE, Notimex, 01/07/91)

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