

10-26-2000

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LADB Staff. "Rumors of Coup Exacerbate Political Crisis in Haiti." (2000). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8768>

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Rumors of Coup Exacerbate Political Crisis in Haiti

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Haiti

Published: 2000-10-26

With the presidential election a month away, Haiti continues in a state of political crisis, aggravated by rumors of a coup against President Rene Preval. Several police officers allegedly involved in the plot have fled to the Dominican Republic seeking political asylum. Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis announced Oct. 19 that seven officers of the national police force (Police Nationale d'Haiti, PNH) had been arrested and charged with conspiring to overthrow the Preval government. Alexis said the plot might have included plans to assassinate him and distribute large quantities of arms to government opponents.

In Santo Domingo, Armed Forces Secretary Miguel Soto said the Dominican military had detained seven more Haitian police officers who entered the country on tourist visas. The seven turned themselves over to the military in the border provinces of Dajabon and Monte Cristi and were held for questioning.

A few days later, two more Haitian police entered the country and asked for political asylum. One explanation for the alleged coup attempt circulating in Haiti was police revenge against the governing Fanmi Lavalas of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1990-1995) following a recent clash between Aristide supporters and police.

A police officer was injured in the encounter. Aristide registered Oct. 9 as a presidential candidate in the Nov. 26 elections. He faces four other candidates, none of whom is given any chance to win the election since the major opposition parties are boycotting it.

Opposition in Haiti says coup story is a fake

Gerard Pierre Charles, secretary general of the opposition party Organisation de Peuple en Lutte (OPL), said the story of a coup plot was invented by the government and the Lavalas party. In an interview with the Dominican daily Listin Diario, Charles said the Preval government might have hoped to divert attention from its electoral troubles as the election campaign begins.

At present, the government and Organization of American States (OAS) envoy Luigi Einaudi are negotiating measures to guarantee that the election will be fair. The government has failed to satisfy the OAS and the international community in general about its handling of the parliamentary elections in May (see NotiCen, 2000-06-01, 2000-06-29). And, negotiations thus far have shown little progress, since the opposition wants guarantees to come from direct negotiations with Aristide and Preval.

Other political leaders consulted by Listin Diario said there was no evidence in Port-au-Prince of a coup conspiracy. The officers detained near the border told Dominican authorities there was no plot and that they had no problem with the Preval government. The problems were the work of Lavalas Senators-elect Danny Toussaint and Medard Joseph, who were plotting to take control of

the police, said one of the officers, Guy Philipe, assistant police chief of the northern city of Cap Haitien. Toussaint is former police chief and former head of security in the Aristide administration and the owner of a private security business.

On Oct. 21, the Haitian government requested the extradition of the officers from the Dominican Republic. Dominican President Hipolito Mejia said he might grant political asylum depending on the outcome of an investigation into the alleged conspiracy. The officers have expressed an interest in taking refuge in Ecuador.

On Oct. 24, Dominican Foreign Relations Secretary Hugo Tolentino Dipp informed his Haitian counterpart Fritz Longchamp that the Mejia administration had rejected the extradition request. He said the administration would look for a third country to accept the Haitians. Tolentino Dipp said that Longchamp had told him the officers were not involved in the coup attempt but Haiti wanted them returned anyway because they had violated Haitian laws and therefore they had no basis for requesting political asylum. Meanwhile, the Preval government announced changes in the top leadership of the police, removing four police chiefs. [Sources: Spanish News Service EFE, 10/09/00, 10/19/00; Haiti en Marche, El Siglo (Dominican Republic), 10/20/00; Associated Press, 10/21/00; Listin Diario, (Dominican Republic), 10/19/00, 10/24/00, 10/25/00]

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