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In Haiti Negotiations Between Government and Opposition Continue

by LADB Staff

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Recent talks between the government of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the opposition coalition Convergence Democratique (CD) appear to have yielded results that suggest international aid funds might begin moving again to Haiti. However, a new round of violence and arrests could set the process back.

In mid-July, Aristide and the CD agreed to call new parliamentary and local elections, although dates have not been set. The CD has been reluctant to accept deals with Aristide short of scrapping the recent election results that it says gave the governing Fanmi Lavalas a lopsided majority in parliament through fraud and intimidation. The crisis stems from disputed elections in May 2000 in which both the opposition and international observers found that the government-appointed electoral commission (Conseil Electoral Provisoire, CEP) had employed vote calculations that favored Lavalas candidates. The Convergence refused to participate in the November 2000 presidential election, which Aristide won easily.

The CD refused to recognize Aristide's legitimacy and proclaimed itself an alternative government (see NotiCen, 2000-12-27, 2001-06-14). But after three days of negotiations in July mediated by Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary General Cesar Gaviria and representatives of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), CD leader Gerard Pierre-Charles said, "We've made a lot of progress. We're negotiating in good faith." Prime Minister Jean-Marie Cheralst agreed, saying, "This is a major step, and it's clear we are not far from resolving the crisis. Both sides have understood the importance of getting out of the crisis."

The government and the CD agreed to continue negotiating after Gaviria's departure July 16. So far, they have agreed to elect an entirely new lower chamber of parliament and 18 seats in the 27-seat Senate. The CD wants local and parliamentary elections held in November 2002, while the government wants a later date. Gaviria said he was convinced that Aristide had met all US and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) demands to improve the political climate in Haiti, indicating that US\$500 million in aid money that has been held up during the political crisis might soon begin flowing. An OAS source said the only thing missing was acceptance of the agreements by the opposition.

Assault on police facility threatens talks

A violent assault on a police facility threatened to disrupt the ongoing negotiations. On July 28, an unidentified band of twenty men attacked a police barracks and took over the headquarters of a police SWAT unit housed in the former Petion-Ville military academy in Port-au-Prince, killing four police officers and injuring eight others. A police source said the attackers were former members of

the now defunct Haitian army who are living in the US and the Dominican Republic. The purpose of the assault, said the source, was to steal arms stored in the former academy and use them to overthrow the Aristide government. Dominican Foreign Relations Secretary Hugo Tolentino Dipp said several of the attackers had fled across the border into the Dominican Republic and were being questioned by Dominican authorities.

In the aftermath, Lavalas leader Yvon Neptune said the opposition was responsible for the attack. CD leaders denied the charge, and CD spokesman Serge Gilles said the Lavalas government made a habit of manufacturing incidents like the attack on the police installation and then using them as a pretext to arrest opposition politicians. In a similar incident last year, police were accused of attempting a coup and many fled across the border, but they denied there had been any attack on the Haitian government (see NotiCen, 2000-10-26).

On Aug. 1, the CD issued a statement saying that the July 28 assault and others that followed were part of a campaign of terror designed to derail the talks on holding new elections. The statement cited several other attacks on police facilities and opposition-party members around the country that resulted in six deaths and 14 people injured. "They want to destroy Convergence Democratique," said the statement, as well as other opposition groups, and "set up a bloody and dictatorial regime." Following the assaults, police arrested several former army officers.

Police also arrested Mario Andresol, former head of the judicial police during the presidency of Rene Preval (1996-2001). The hunt was so fierce that Dominican authorities worried that it might cause a general stampede of Haitian refugees across the border. By Aug. 10, 24 of the 41 arrested had been released. Police gave no information about the 17 still held in jail. During the first week in August, Gaviria's spokesman, Sergio Romero Cuevas, renewed discussions with Lavalas and the CD, then announced the government was ready to resume talks on new elections. The CD, however, made any new negotiations dependent on an end to the arrests of opposition leaders. CD leader Paul Denis said Aristide must end his "duplicitous habit of saying one thing and doing another."

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