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Haiti: Human rights caught between groups on collision course

Haiti is headed towards violence and abuses on an unprecedented scale, Amnesty International said today.

Rebel leaders have announced their intention to attack the capital, Port-au-Prince, this weekend and government supporters are reportedly engaged in looting and thefts in advance of the rebel assault.

The organization urgently called on both sides to step back from their current paths, which have already led to numerous human rights abuses by both rebel forces and government supporters, and which have set them on a collision course in which more such abuses are inevitable.

At the same time, Amnesty International is deeply concerned by yesterday's statement by US President George Bush indicating that he has instructed the US Coast Guard to intercept and turn back any potential Haitian asylum seekers and warning Haitians not to try to reach the USA.

"The US has an obligation under international law to ensure that Haitians are able to exercise their right to seek and enjoy asylum," the organization said.

"Under international law the US is obliged not to reject asylum-seekers at its frontiers. Any move to intercept them and forcibly return them to a country where they would face grave abuses of their human rights would breach the most fundamental principle of international refugee law, the principle of *non-refoulement*."

Bush's statement came as the UN Security Council planned for a meeting today to address the crisis in Haiti. Countries such as France and the Bahamas have called for an international peacekeeping force to help ensure order in Haiti. It is unclear whether they would want deployment of such a force to be contingent on all sides first reaching some kind of political settlement.

"Any political settlement amongst the various Haitian actors must be grounded in the rule of law, and ultimately in the Haitian Constitution, for there to be a lasting solution to the current crisis," Amnesty International concluded.

Background Information

Rebel leaders include notorious figures such as Louis Jodel Chamblain and Jean Tatoune, convicted of gross human rights violations committed a decade ago. Their forces are reported to include a number of former soldiers implicated in human rights abuses in the Central Plateau region of Haiti over the last year.

After taking control of the country's second city, Cap Haïtien, over the weekend, rebel forces reportedly rounded up suspected government supporters. The fate of many of those taken into rebel custody remains unknown, leading to fears of potential human rights abuses ranging from unlawful detention to arbitrary or summary executions.

For their part, government supporters, including the police force and unofficial armed gangs in Port-au-Prince and elsewhere have been accused of increasing numbers of abuses against perceived opposition supporters and members of the general public as tensions rise.

On Tuesday, leaders of opposition political parties rejected a settlement proposed by the international community to help resolve the political stand-off. The government had agreed to the settlement.

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