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Haiti: political will to end the cycle of violence

It is imperative that the Haitian authorities show clearly to the Haitian and the international community that they will no longer tolerate human rights abuses, said Amnesty International in a letter addressed to the president, Jean Bertrand Aristide, as well as police and justice authorities.

In the letter, Amnesty International is calling on the Haitian government to promptly start a full and independent investigation into the human rights abuses against demonstrators, bystanders and journalists that have occurred over the last five days, culminating in confrontations between police and gunmen yesterday in the capital, Port-au-Prince.

"Amnesty International is once again urging the authorities that every effort be made to protect peaceful demonstrators and bystanders and to ensure that justice is done once and for all," said the organization.

"These measures are imperative, not only to protect human rights but also to show clearly to the Haitian and international public that the authorities will no longer tolerate such abuses," Amnesty International stressed.

It was reported that on Sunday 18 January, unidentified gunmen opened fire on opposition demonstrators and bystanders in a number of locations in Port-au-Prince, wounding up to six people. Haitian National Police returned fire, and the demonstration was able to continue. During the events, demonstrators threw rocks at the national television station, damaging the premises, a number of journalists were also harassed in different incidents throughout the capital during the day's events.

"Amnesty International is as ever deeply concerned by human rights abuses by political partisans on all sides, and calls on parties to respect the fundamental rights of all Haitians, regardless of their political views," the organisation concluded.

Background Information

Human rights abuses committed during increasingly frequent street demonstrations have contributed to growing instability in Haiti. During an official briefing on 17 December, President Aristide said that any attempt at a coup d'état in Haiti would be destructive to the country. His remarks followed press statements by Dany Toussaint, a former parliamentarian with Aristide's party who was indicted in the 2000 murder of journalist Jean Dominique and who has recently joined the opposition to Aristide, regarding opposition marches on the National Palace.

Opposition politicians have reportedly been invited to participate in talks with CARICOM officials

later this week, in an effort to negotiate a peaceful solution to the political impasse.

On Friday 16 January, violence broke out after the funeral for Maxime Desulmant, a university graduate killed during 7 January clashes between opposition protestors, government supporters and police in Port-au-Prince. Following a church service, his coffin was reportedly taken by student demonstrators to accompany them on an unannounced march to protest against the government. Near the barriers to the entrance of the National Palace, the students reportedly clashed with Haitian National Police who used tear gas and fired shots in the air to disperse them; according to some reports, pro-government counter-demonstrators were also involved. Students, who reported some injuries in the confrontation before the Palace, then apparently took the coffin to a number of other locations before it was returned to the victim's family.

On Thursday 15 January, anti-government marchers in the town of St. Marc reported that three of their number were injured by gunfire during an attack by pro-government activists. In an apparent reprisal attack, assailants burned the home of the local government prosecutor, which also housed the office of a private radio station, Radio America. Private Radio Pyramide, another radio station which had just reopened after having been attacked in November by residents who accused it of airing pro-government views, was also burnt down.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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