

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Haiti: political leaders must reject violence**

Amnesty International today, International Human Rights Day, called on the government and all political parties in Haiti to publicly reject the vicious cycle of political violence and human rights abuses currently gripping the country.

Up to five people have reportedly been killed and many more wounded in violent clashes involving partisans of opposing parties and at times the police over the last three weeks. The wave of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations began after Haitian political leaders failed to move towards long called-for elections in line with resolutions of the Organisation of American States. In addition to the formation of a cross-sector Provisional Electoral Council, the resolutions called for measures such as disarming political partisans and others and improving accountability.

"All parties are responsible for the abuses committed by their partisans. Now is the time for all political leaders to demonstrate their rejection of the tradition of impunity by taking concrete steps to bring those involved to justice," Amnesty International said.

"Those who are truly concerned with the welfare of the Haitian people and the rule of law must act now, so that the violence that has gripped the country for the last three weeks does not become a full-blown human rights crisis."

"For its part, the Haitian National Police must act at all times with impartiality and respect for human rights, and must ensure that demonstrators' right to free speech and expression is protected," the organization added. "When violations are reported, these must be immediately investigated and the officers involved brought to justice."

"We urge the government and supporters of all parties to seek solutions that are grounded in full respect for human rights," concluded Amnesty International.

#### **Background**

On 17 November, the largest ever anti-government march was held, in Cap Haïtien. While it took place peacefully, subsequent demonstrations in other parts of the country, including Port-au-Prince, Gonaïves, Saint Marc and Petit Goâve, were marred by violence by pro- and at times anti-government partisans. The Haitian National Police has been accused of repressing anti-government protests while failing to intervene to control violent pro-government crowds.

In Petit Goâve on 20 November, at least seven demonstrators were reportedly wounded as the Haitian National Police fired at students protesting a rumoured increase in exam fees. Authorities' claims that the marchers had been infiltrated by armed supporters of the opposition party were dismissed by journalists and other observers.

Elsewhere, a justice of the peace was said to have been shot and killed while participating in a march in support of the government in the Central Plateau on 28 November, while numerous people were reportedly injured when government partisans violently broke up an opposition march in Port-au-Prince on 3 December.

Most recently, on 6 December the headquarters of an opposition party in Port-au-Prince was reportedly burned down by suspected arsonists. The same day, unidentified assailants were said to have opened fire on the vehicle of a senator from the ruling Fanmi Lavalas party; no one was believed to have been injured.

Tensions between the government and supporters of the dominant party Fanmi Lavalas on the one hand, and members of opposition parties on the other, have been high since disputed elections in 2000. These tensions have been exacerbated by the recent increase in violence and the emergence onto the political scene of military and paramilitary leaders from Haiti's repressive past.

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