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Haiti: Human rights efforts at risk

Haiti's efforts to foster a climate of respect for human rights are at serious risk, Amnesty International said today, as it revealed the findings from its latest visit to the country.

"A series of violent events in Haiti have led to fears that the climate of respect for human rights which the country has been endeavouring to promote in recent years is progressively deteriorating," Amnesty International said.

An Amnesty International delegation just returned from the country points to the following events as symptomatic of this decline:

- 8 October -- Jean Lamy, ex-Colonel of the former Armed Forces of Haiti (FADH) -- reportedly an advisor to the Haitian National Police (HNP) and a potential candidate for Secretary of State for Public Security -- was assassinated in an apparently well-organized attack by unidentified armed individuals.

14 October -- The Director of the HNP's Judicial Police -- the unit responsible for investigating Lamy's killing -- narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by unidentified armed persons outside his home.

16 October -- Individuals claiming to be partisans of ex-president Jean Bertrand Aristide's Famille Lavalas party disrupted Lamy's funeral service, forcing the HNP's General Director Pierre Denize to flee the building.

- 24 October -- Individuals claiming to be partisans of Famille Lavalas violently disrupted the opening ceremony of the civic education campaign organized by the Provisional Electoral Council in preparation for the March 2000 local and legislative elections.

These events have taken place against the background of a widely-reported campaign to undermine the neutrality and effectiveness of the new police force, charged among other duties with providing a climate of security for the upcoming elections.

"We call on the Haitian Government to reinforce respect for human rights by ensuring that the police and the judiciary carry out their duties in a neutral, independent and impartial manner," Amnesty International said.

"The Haitian Government must ensure that recruitment of new officers -- announced to increase police capacity to provide security during the elections -- takes place in a transparent and

non-partisan manner. Measures announced by the Minister of Justice to safeguard the impartiality of judicial authorities in the electoral context should be enacted as soon as possible," Amnesty International stressed.

"We also urge all political parties involved in the electoral process to ensure that their supporters act in a way conducive to the holding of free and fair elections," the organization concluded.

Other human rights concerns

With regard to cases of human rights violations involving members of the HNP, Amnesty International welcomed indications from officials that the findings of the judicial commission established to investigate the killing of 11 people by police in Carrefourfeuilles, in May 1999, will be released shortly, and called for prompt action by the justice system to bring those responsible to trial.

Amnesty International remains concerned at reported shootings in circumstances indicating excessive use of force and beatings following arrest. The organization has urged the Inspection General (internal police disciplinary body) to pursue such cases and has called on the judiciary to investigate and bring those responsible to justice, promptly and impartially.

According to numerous sources, over 80% of Haiti's detainees are in pre-trial detention -- in some cases held for several years -- in violation of an individual's right to due process in a reasonable timeframe. Amnesty International welcomes a pledge by the Minister of Justice to substantially reduce this practice by the end of 1999, and to take action on the situation of detainees who have benefited from judicial release orders that have never been executed.

During their visit to Haiti, the Amnesty International delegates received several reports of ill-treatment in detention centers. The organization is concerned that prison overcrowding -- partly due to lack of prompt judicial attention to cases -- is fostering tensions between detainees and guards and has created conditions that constitute cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in some cases.

Amnesty International has called on the Direction d'Administration Penitentiaire (body in charge of prison administration) to take all steps to ensure that its staff acts according to international human rights standards and its own recent internal regulations.

Amnesty International welcomes the progress made with regard to the trial of those accused in the Raboteau massacre, and encourages Haitian authorities to continue to make all efforts to end impunity for human rights violations, past and present.

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