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Haiti: Bring Jean-Claude Duvalier to justice

Amnesty International today urged Haitian authorities to bring former President Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier to justice for the human rights abuses committed under his regime from 1971 and 1986.

The call came as Amnesty international publishes a new report with evidence of arbitrary detentions, torture, deaths in custody, killings and disappearances during Jean-Claude Duvalier’s rule.

“There’s sufficient evidence to prosecute Jean-Claude Duvalier for the widespread arbitrary detentions, torture, deaths in custody, killings and disappearances that took place during his regime, some of which amount to crimes against humanity,” said Javier Zúñiga, Special Advisor at Amnesty International.

“What is needed is political will from Haiti’s new administration to comply with their international obligations and their duty to the survivors and victims of abuses.”

Duvalier returned to Haiti in January 2011, after 25 years in exile in France.

He was indicted by Haitian authorities for embezzlement, theft of public funds and crimes against humanity committed during his presidency.

At the time, Amnesty International provided Port-au-Prince’s Public Prosecutor with documented evidence of human rights abuses committed during his rule to help inform the investigation.

Between 1971 and 1986, political leaders, journalists, trade unionists and those suspected of being opponents of the government were particular targets of arbitrary detentions, torture, political killings and disappearances. Deaths in custody were common among political prisoners, who regularly suffered torture, illness, and a lack of food and sanitary facilities.

The judiciary intervened only in the very few cases that received wide international publicity but Duvalier’s government never recognized the existence of political prisoners.

Opposition party member Augustin Auguste was reportedly arrested on 28 January 1986 in Port-au-Prince by members of an armed militia known as the ‘tonton macoutes’. He was seen at the Military Hospital and then taken to the prison at Fort Dimanche where he is believed to have been shot dead on 3 February.

He was never seen again and his family has never been given an official explanation of what happened to him. Auguste had been arrested several times previously in connection with his membership of the Haitian Christian Democratic Party. He was one of thousands of victims of Duvalier’s rule.

A former political prisoner described prison conditions in January 1973: “Individual cells were normally seven feet long, seven feet high and three feet wide (two metres long, two metres high and one metre wide). Some of them were mere ‘cubby holes’ in which the prisoner can stretch out or curl but cannot

stand upright. Communal cells are three metres by three metres and sometimes held up to 15 prisoners. They had to take turns to sleep, squatting or standing. There was no form of ventilation in the cell and daylight cannot get in. A harsh electric light burns day and night so that many prisoners suffer with their eyesight.”

“The cases of human rights abuses we documented in Haiti are likely to be only a small proportion of what really happened during Duvalier’s rule. We will probably never know the true extent of the horror, but carrying out effective investigations will go a long way towards delivering justice,” said Javier Zúñiga.

“Haiti’s current government led by President Michel Martelly has an obligation under international law to bring to justice those responsible for the crimes against humanity committed during Duvalier’s years.”

"Investigating crimes against humanity after Duvalier’s return is not only the first step towards justice and reparation for the victims of human rights violations, but it is also a historical opportunity to start building a Haitian state that once and for all protects and upholds human rights in Haiti," said Javier Zúñiga.