

Haiti: primacy of human rights must be reaffirmed

Haiti is at a critical juncture in human rights terms, Amnesty International said today, having recently concluded a two-week visit to the country. While noting some positive developments, for example in prison management, the organization strongly urged the Haitian authorities to assert their commitment to human rights principles in the face of a series of challenges unprecedented in recent years.

"The climate of respect for human rights which has been under construction since the end of the military regime in 1994 is facing some of the most overt and difficult challenges ever," the organization said. "It is imperative that the Haitian authorities demonstrate, in concrete actions, that they are truly committed to maintaining independent institutions and the rule of law."

*The organization's visit to Haiti coincided with a difficult test for the country's police and justice systems. Warrants issued for the arrest of three leaders of popular organizations that claim close ties to the ruling party, *Fanmi Lavalas*, have yet to be acted upon, as all three apparently continue to circulate freely in Port-au-Prince. Two of the men are wanted for questioning in the inquiry into the April 2000 murders of Haiti's most well-respected journalist, Jean Dominique, and security guard Jean Claude Louissaint. The third has been named in the investigation into the recent murder of another activist.*

"The investigation into the Jean Dominique case is, in itself, a crucial test of Haiti's commitment to human rights principles," Amnesty International said, regretting that it has been stalled for two months as a Senate committee deliberates whether to lift the parliamentary immunity of a senator also reportedly implicated in the case. "Such delays cast serious doubts as to the authorities' willingness to act on their often-stated dedication to transparency, justice and accountability," the organization added.

A recent series of reported killings of civilians during police operations in Cité Soleil, a densely populated area of Port-au-Prince, has raised concerns

about police conduct and accountability. An investigation into one such killing, that of 16-year-old Mackenson Fleurimon on 11 October, has been blocked by the refusal of the officer implicated to respond to summons. The officer is under further investigation for having beaten and threatened a radio journalist who had been gathering material for a report on Mackenson's killing.

Recent statements by national human rights organizations denouncing violations at the hands of the police appear to have prompted death threats reported last week by several members of Haiti's most prominent human rights organizations, the National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR) and the Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organizations (POHDH).

In the light of this worrying development, Amnesty International has written to Haitian President Jean Bertrand Aristide urging the government to take immediate steps to protect journalists and human rights defenders, to fully investigate all threats and violence against them, and to bring those responsible to justice.

Following its visit the organization expressed appreciation to President Aristide for the openness of the Haitian officials who discussed human rights issues of mutual concern with its delegates. The delegates noted positive steps in the prison system, including efforts to reduce pre-trial detention in the national penitentiary.

"For such positive steps not to be lost, the Haitian government must firmly reassert the primacy of human rights principles over any other interests, particularly with respect to the functioning of the police, the behaviour of ruling party partisans and the protection of journalists and human rights defenders," Amnesty International said.

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