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Haiti: Human rights violations still flourishing under democratic government

Nearly four years after the restoration of a democratically elected government in Haiti, impunity and lack of speedy progress on judicial reform are placing human rights on the edge of a dangerous precipice, Amnesty International said today, as it published its latest report on the human rights situation in the country.

“Although the scale of serious human rights violations is much lower than under the military government, Haiti is still struggling precariously to consolidate the gains that have been made,” Amnesty International said.

Torture and ill-treatment, extrajudicial executions, and killings in suspicious circumstances are still cause for serious concern, and over the past two years people have been arrested for allegedly conspiring against the government, on what looks like flimsy evidence, and often without adhering to correct legal procedures.

Since 1994, little real progress has been made in bringing to justice those responsible for human rights violations, past or present. Upon President Aristide’s return, victims and relatives of victims were encouraged to lodge complaints; however, insufficient resources were provided to follow up the complaints and very few reached the courts. Only three prominent human rights cases have so far been brought to trial.

This failure to address the question of impunity for past human rights abuses –together with the lack of speedy progress on judicial reform –has created an atmosphere in which human rights violations continue to flourish.

“The building of the strong institutions needed for a society in which the protection of human rights is guaranteed is quite simply taking too long,” Amnesty International said. “President René García Préal has often declared his government’s commitment to ending impunity –as did former President Aristide –but the establishment of a judicial system capable of guaranteeing access to justice for the victims has been piecemeal and plagued with delays.”

“Failure to urgently tackle this issue may have dire consequences for the future of human rights in Haiti, and will continue to undermine progress made in other fields,” Amnesty International warned.

The Amnesty International report places particular emphasis on the obligation of foreign governments to cooperate with the Haitian Government in bringing human rights violators to justice, even by prosecuting them in their own courts if such persons enter their territory.

The report examines past and recent cases of human rights violations, with special emphasis on the record of the Haitian National Police, allegations of ill-treatment and excessive use of force by specialized police units, and the role of parallel security forces. The report also

highlights the role played by the failure of the authorities to ensure a secure environment for the general population and the ineffectiveness of the justice system.

According to Amnesty International, the frustration this has generated amongst Haitian people has continued to lead to instances of “popular justice” --including the lynching of at least three police officers in early 1998.

Amnesty International’s report proposes a series of steps which the organization believes should be implemented as a matter of urgency. This will finally demonstrate the Haitian government’s political will to end impunity for past and present human rights violations. The recommendations include giving the highest possible priority to the process of judicial reform --including the incorporation of international standards into domestic legislation, and the constitution.

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For further information, to request a copy of the report or to arrange an interview, please phone Soraya Bermejo, Press Officer, on +44 171 413 5562

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