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Haiti: Human rights and rule of law must be upheld

The political violence and instability which have followed the prison escape of political activist Amio Métayer are seriously undermining the rule of law and may jeopardise human rights in the Haitian town of Gonaïves, Amnesty International said today.

On Saturday 3 August, Amio Métayer escaped from prison along with an estimated 150 other inmates. During the wave of violence that surrounded the escape, one person was killed, and many buildings were burned or destroyed. Gonaïves has witnessed an alarming lack of control since the violence erupted on Friday.

"Armed gangs supporting political activists or locally elected officials have been allowed to consolidate their presence and now constitute a serious challenge to the rule of law in the country," Amnesty International warned, stressing that in the past such armed gangs have clearly been responsible for human rights abuses.

"In the face of this critical situation, it is the duty of the Haitian authorities to protect the lives and physical integrity of all citizens, restore public order and the rule of law, and make every effort to protect the institutions of the state, including the justice system," the organization said.

Amnesty International also urges the Haitian authorities to take immediate action to bring to justice those responsible both for orchestrating and carrying out the recent acts of violence in Gonaïves, to take all measures necessary and possible to ensure that security can be restored to the city -- in full respect of international standards regulating the use of force and firearms by law enforcement officials -- and to ensure that the judicial system can function effectively.

Background

According to reports, the recent wave of violence in Gonaïves has been orchestrated and carried out by armed supporters loyal to Amio Métayer -- an armed group that calls itself the "Cannibal Army". On Friday 1 August, members of popular organizations began protesting and demanding Amio Métayer's release. They then reportedly set up burning barricades and attacked the mayor's offices, set fire to a lorry belonging to the municipality, and took over the Court of Appeal's office where they burnt many documents. On Saturday 2 August heavily-armed gunmen drove a tractor through the wall of the prison in Gonaïves, freeing approximately 150 prisoners. Further to this, the town courthouse and city hall were set on fire. The local press reported that on Monday, thousands of protesters, some armed, hurled stones at outnumbered Haitian police -- who were forced to retreat -- setting up barricades of burning tyres, and shouting slogans calling for the arrest of President Aristide. Many local residents are said to have left the area.

Local reports claim that whilst police have been present throughout the violence, they have been outnumbered on several occasions, and have not approached the stronghold that Métayer has reportedly set up for himself and his gang in the slum area of Raboteau, in Gonaïves.

Métayer, a former supporter of the leading *Fanmi Lavalas* party, is claiming that he has been betrayed by President Aristide, and is calling for Aristide to be arrested, his administration to be replaced by an interim government and for new elections to be held. Amio Métayer was arrested on 2 July 2002 in connection with alleged acts of violence committed in the wake of last December's attack by unidentified gunmen on the National Palace. His arrest followed the publication of a report on the 17 December attack and its aftermath by an investigative team of the Organization of American States. The report had urged that all those implicated in the violence of 17 December be prosecuted without delay. Métayer had originally been held in Port-au-Prince but was transferred back to Gonaïves following several violent demonstrations by his supporters.

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