



PRESIDENT OF HAITI RESIGNS; U.S. TROOPS ENTER CARIBBEAN NATION

March 1, 2004

After increasing diplomatic pressure from the United States and other allies, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti fled into exile Sunday, leaving the Caribbean nation in a state of turmoil.

Following Aristide's resignation, President Bush authorized the deployment of about 200 Marines as part of an "interim international force" to restore order. The U.S. troops join soldiers from countries such as Canada and France that are trying to stop the looting and revenge killings that have destabilized Haiti in the past several weeks.

The situation in Haiti, which shares an island with the Dominican Republic around 600 miles off the coast of Florida, has sparked political debate over when and how the United States should intervene in emergency situations around the world. And pressure to resolve the crisis continues, especially from the large number of Haitians living in New York and Florida.

Exile

Following weeks of violent protests, a U.S. military aircraft carried the displaced Aristide and his American wife, Mildred Trouillot Aristide, to the Central African Republic, where they are expected to stay "for a short time," according to state radio.

The couple had earlier in the week sent their two daughters to Mildred's mother's home in New York City.

In a letter explaining his resignation, the former president said that he left to prevent further bloodshed and to ensure that the new government would conform to Haiti's Constitution.

"[The Constitution] should not be drowned in the Haitian people's blood. This is why tonight, if it is my resignation that will prevent a bloodbath, I agree to go with the hope that there will be life and not death."

Haiti's chief justice of the Supreme Court, Boniface Alexandre, was sworn in as the leader of a transitional government until elections can be held in 2005, as defined under the Haitian Constitution.

Violent uprising

In the 200 years since it gained independence from France, Haiti has been plagued by violent uprisings and brutal military dictatorships.

Many Haitians hoped that Aristide, a former priest, would end the painful cycle when he became Haiti's first democratically elected president in 1990. However, he was only in the presidential palace for several months before a military coup forced him into exile. U.S. troops reinstated him in 1994 and he finished the end of his five-year term.

He returned to power in 2000, but many of his critics believe that the elections were marred by corruption. A coalition of political parties, civil societies, trade unions and business associations boycotted the Congress, and refused to cooperate in any government initiatives until he resigned.

At the same time, armed rebel groups -- not linked to the political opposition groups -- began violent clashes with government supporters especially in the North.

In recent days law and order has broken down and ordinary citizens have been caught up in the looting of stores, government buildings and hospitals. Dozens have been killed.

U.S. troops

The initial 200 U.S. Marines who arrived in the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince late Sunday night could be joined by hundreds more, according to Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"I don't think there will be a great deal of fighting, but they have to be prepared for that. They need to bring a sense of security back to society, as we have done in times past. Unfortunately, that security didn't stick because of the flawed politics of Haiti," Powell said.

According to a deal reached by the United Nations, the troops will remain no longer than three months, at which time they will be replaced by U.N. peacekeepers.

The U.S. Coast Guard has also been on duty in the area. Three ships stationed just offshore have been picking up Haitians who are trying to flee the violent nation and returning them home.

Foreign policy criticism

"This is the beginning of a new chapter in the country's history," President Bush said Sunday. "I would urge the people of Haiti to reject violence to give this break from the past a chance to work. The United States is prepared to help."

The Democratic presidential candidates and the Congressional Black Caucus, a group of black Congress members who advocate for black and minority citizens, have criticized the Bush administration's handling of the Haiti crisis, saying that lack of attention allowed the situation to spiral out of control.

Rep. Charles Rangel, a Democrat from New York and a member of the Congressional Black Caucus who was deeply involved in restoring Aristide to power in 1994, said the United States must shoulder much of the blame for Aristide's fall and the chaos that brought it on.

"We are just as much a part of this coup d'etat as the rebels, looters or anyone else," he said.

But Powell said Aristide had a large role in creating the political crisis. After the United States reinstated the leader in 1994, Powell said, "corruption came into play, inefficiency came into play, cronyism came into play and the whole political tapestry of the country came apart."

By Annie Schleicher, NewsHour Extra

© 2004 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions