

News: Haitian President Resigns as Rebels Storm Capital City

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National / International
Reporter

Armed rebels, made up mostly of former members of Haiti's military, swelled into the nation's capital Port-au-Prince early last week following president Jean-Bertrand Aristide's resignation and departure from Haiti under armed US guard.

Aristide's resignation came one day after he vowed to remain in office until the end of his elected mandate, set for February 7th 2006. The 50 year-old former priest was democratically elected on November 26th 2000, and said in his letter of resignation that he was only stepping down to ensure the "life and peace" of his people. "If my resignation can prevent bloodshed, I will agree to go." He claimed that terrorists and criminals had orchestrated a coup to purge him from office. After being by of 20 heavily-armed US Marines out of Port-au-Prince, he was flown by a US military envoy to the Central African Republic where he remains as a political exile. He said later that the US had committed what was equivalent to kidnaping. During an interview on CNN he stated that "I called it a coup d'état because it is a modern kidnaping."

United States Secretary of State, Colin Powell denied the accusation that the removal of the Haitian president was forced by the US military. "We [US forces] did not force him onto the airplane. He went onto the airplane willingly and that's the truth." US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld echoed Powell's comments, stating that the US moved only after Aristide had decided to leave. "Before the US made a decision...we had, I believe, in hand a letter of resignation [from Aristide]." Those clos-

est to Aristide questioned this explanation. One former personal assistant of the Haitian president, Laura Flynn, said that she believed that Aristide wouldn't have left without being forced. "He would have broadcast to the nation urging Haitians to remain calm."

George W. Bush issued a statement saying that he deployed Marines to the region "to help restore order and stability to Haiti." The US, as well as Canada and France had refused to send in troops earlier in the crisis to protect Aristide's mandate. After weeks of fighting between rebels and Haiti's police forces and failed diplomatic talks headed by Canada, the United States and France, the capital city fell to rebels while under careful watch of armed forces personnel from Canada and the US. Canadian soldiers were sent to the region to protect the Canadian Embassy and citizens in the country just days before, and worked to guard the airport throughout the securing and evacuation process. After attempting to broker a peaceful resolution, both France and the United States were pushing for the Haitian president to step down in order to halt the bloodshed. Before Aristide stepped down, it was expected that Canada would also join with France and the US in making the same suggestion to the president, much to the disappointment of many in Haiti and around Caribbean, given Canada's diplomatic strength in the region.

Upon Aristide's resignation, Powell stated that though Aristide was democratically elected, he was not necessarily a good leader, "he did not democratically govern or govern well." However many are concerned that this type of intervention by the US could set a dangerous precedent for similar conflicts involving other elected officials around the region and

the world.

For their part, many in Port-au-Prince seemed overjoyed to have the military force within the gates of the city. "We feel free. Now we can go wherever we want." said Haitian Darlene Jean-Baptiste. Many of the insurgents entering the city were former members of Haiti's armed forces that disposed president Aristide in 1990, and that he disbanded shortly after he was returned to power in 1994. Reportedly, some of the rebels were also convicted murderers and death-squad members. The leaders of the armed uprising were Guy Phillippe, a former police chief who is also accused of numerous violent crimes, and former army officer Louis-Jodel Champlain. At a press conference last Tuesday, Phillippe declared himself the new military chief of Haiti, and warned interim president Boniface Alexandre, a highly respected Supreme Court Justice, to restore the armed forces. If he failed to do so, said Phillippe, "The people of Haiti will speak to him the way they spoke to Aristide." While refusing to relinquish command of the city and lay down their arms, as demanded by officials within the US State Department, Phillippe did pledge to work alongside US, French and other UN-authorized forces in Haiti. The rebels denied having any political aspirations, yet threatened the sitting Prime Minister and other friends of Aristide. This came while the Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Yvon Neptune declared a state of emergency in Port-au-Prince and US forces scrambled to protect loyalists of the former president. However, by Wednesday night, Phillippe had agreed to order his "new army" to lay down their weapons, following an increased foreign military presence in the city. When asked of the consequences that the rebels would face, Champlain told reporters that he was not afraid of any backlash

stemming from his involvement. "I have no fear because of anything I've done." he said. "We have to work together."

Many political analysts are concerned that restoring order will now be increasingly difficult now, especially given the militant influence in the capital region. Haiti, a country plagued with political oppression of brutal military dictators throughout its 200-year history, was in the process of transforming into a more democratic republic, but now is in danger of returning to a system of brute force and intimidation. If Aristide's claims of a coup d'état are accurate, it would be the 33rd in the country's history.

Prime Minister Paul Martin said that Canada would play a "leadership role" in restoring peace and stability. Last weekend sixty Canadian soldiers in Haiti, along with forty air force ground personnel in the neighboring Dominican Republic aided the evacuation of more than 350 Canadian citizens out of Haiti by the time commercial flights were cleared to resume on Thursday. In addition to the Canadian troops, some of which are rumored to be members of Canada's elite JTF2 force, and 100 Marines already in the region at the time of Aristide's resignation, France pledged to send 300 soldiers and gendarmes to help stabilize the situation in Haiti, while both Canada and the US planned to send additional military personnel, a move that will increase the number of Canadian soldiers to 485. Thus far the Canadian contingent sent to the region has been successful in evacuating Canadian citizens and it was reported that Canadian troops were already on the ground and protecting the airport and other key points in the city by the time US Marines landed in Port-au-Prince.