

Haitian Leader Warns of Exodus and Appeals for Help

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By TONY SMITH

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, Feb. 24 — Warning of a blood bath in the capital and a wave of refugees fleeing across the Caribbean to Florida if the rebels advancing against him are not stopped, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide on Tuesday urged the international community to hasten plans to intervene in the deepening crisis.

The prospect of such a conflict seemed much closer on Tuesday night, after the political opposition rejected a regionally brokered power-sharing plan. Opposition leaders refused to accept a pact that would allow the president to serve, with greatly reduced powers, until the end of his term in office in February 2006.

"The international community has an illusion it can turn Jean-Bertrand Aristide into the Queen of England and give the real power to the prime minister and Parliament," said Micha Gaillard, one opposition leader.

"That's utopia," he added. "Even if they strapped his hands to the throne, we know he would create a parallel government, a parallel police force with his gangs."

Speaking at a news conference a day after rebel forces fighting for Mr. Aristide's ouster consolidated their hold over the northern half of Haiti, the president predicted that thousands would die if his armed opponents entered the capital as they have pledged to do by the weekend.

"If they come to Port-au-Prince, you will have thousands of people killed," Mr. Aristide told reporters in the ornate ceremonial hall of his downtown presidential palace.

As if providing evidence, he brandished a handful of images showing piles of bodies that he claimed were some of the 5,000 or more victims killed by the army — whose officers now make up the backbone of the rebel command — in a 1991 coup.

"I would like to see them neutralized rather than have that bloodshed," he said. "We are eager to welcome an international presence."

The conflict pits the rebel troops against the president's demoralized police force and fearsome *chimères*, the brutal gangs used to terrorize political dissidents that have their power base in Port-au-Prince's sprawling shantytowns.

Should the capital become engulfed in fighting, Mr. Aristide predicted it would spark an exodus of desperate refugees sailing in search of a safe haven in Florida.

"How many of them will die before they even reach Florida?" Mr. Aristide asked. "I expect the world to pay attention to the Haitian people through a concrete act of solidarity."

Tens of thousands of Haitians fled in the three years following the 1991 coup in which the president was ousted and a brutal military dictatorship was installed. Their appearance on Florida's coast was one main reason for President Clinton sending 20,000 troops to restore Mr. Aristide to power in 1994.

The Bush administration has made it clear that it has no plans to commit large numbers of troops to Haiti. On Monday, it dispatched 50 marines, but only to guard the American Embassy.

While stopping short of calling for outright military intervention, as Western diplomats here say he was doing in private last week, Mr. Aristide urged the international community to speed up plans for outside aid to overhaul his police force, which has crumbled in the face of rebel advances over the past two weeks.

That cannot happen, however, until opposition parties sign up to the plan, which also foresees a new, multiparty cabinet and greatly reduced powers for the president.

France offered Tuesday to be the host of talks between government and opposition representatives in Paris, but there was no immediate reaction from either Mr. Aristide or the opposition. President Jacques Chirac also said France might consider contributing to a peacekeeping force for Haiti, but only under the auspices of the United Nations.

The opposition's stubborn refusal to sign the agreement has infuriated American and other regional diplomats anxious to prevent further bloodshed in Haiti, where 70 people have died in the unrest.

Mr. Aristide, eager to please the international community, has agreed to sign the deal and is trying to shift the blame for the current violence onto the opposition, although it has no formal ties with the rebels. On Tuesday, he accused the opposition of backing "criminals, terrorists and killers."

Although there are no formal links between the political and military opposition to Mr. Aristide, they both share one chief goal: the president's ouster.

A rebel leader, Guy Philippe, said Tuesday that he had not been consulted by any of the parties involved in negotiating a settlement but insisted that his insurgents would not lay down their weapons unless Mr. Aristide stepped down.

"I will only be involved in a negotiation if Aristide is going to go," Mr. Philippe told reporters in Cap Haitien, Haiti's second largest city, which the rebels seized over the weekend.

He said his troops would form the nucleus of a reformed Haitian Army, which was disbanded by Mr. Aristide in 1994. But he ruled out any prospect of a military government.

"It is not good for the country," he said. "The army should stay in its barracks."

Lydia Polgreen contributed reporting from Cap Haitien for this article.

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