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Haiti's Neighbors Are Pressing Aristide for Reforms

By RICHARD LEZIN JONES

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, Jan. 29 — At 24, David Jonathas is barely old enough to remember the political revolution that eventually placed a Catholic priest named Jean-Bertrand Aristide in the presidential palace. And yet, Mr. Jonathas hopes to be part of another movement, equal in determination to that earlier campaign waged in the late 1980's but with opposite results.

"As long as Aristide is in power, there will be no democracy," said Mr. Jonathas, a student at the University of Haiti, wiping his brow moments after he and a few hundred other students finished a march through the winding, pockmarked streets of the capital here calling for Mr. Aristide's ouster. "He must go. We need a new system."

After a nearly four-year deadlock with critics and opponents, Mr. Aristide has faced increasingly frequent protests over the past few months; in the last month, opposition leaders have called for demonstrations almost daily demanding that he step down. Leaders of neighboring Caribbean nations are pressing him to defuse the situation.

Further complicating matters was the dissolution of Haiti's bicameral legislature earlier this month. Partly because of a boycott by the opposition, the government failed to hold parliamentary elections last year. As a result, the terms of all 83 members of the lower house and about two-thirds of the nation's senators expired, meaning that Mr. Aristide effectively rules by decree.

The protests have grown in size as well — on Tuesday more than 15,000 people marched on the capital — and clashes between antigovernment marchers, supporters of Mr. Aristide and the police have sometimes turned violent. About 50 people have been killed in protests during the past several months, including a university student who was shot by a tear gas canister not far from the United States consulate.

The situation has prompted the leaders of 15 neighboring islands — nations that are part of the international group known as the Caribbean Community, or Caricom — to demand that Mr. Aristide reform the police force, disarm violent gangs of supporters and step up efforts to work with opponents.

Opposition leaders, who met with Caricom leaders in the Bahamas this month, have said that they are willing to continue discussions. Mr. Aristide, who has said he agrees with most of the group's proposals will meet with the organization on Saturday.

Meanwhile, demonstrators continue to take to the streets of Port-au-Prince, in recent days stepping up requests for diplomatic intervention by the United States. "We all want to tell

Bush to meet his responsibility," said Hervé Santilus, of the Student Federation at Haiti University, who, like many here, reasoned that because the United States helped restore Mr. Aristide to power in 1994 after a coup three years earlier, it should also assist in resolving the current crisis.

"We're just going to keep demonstrating to push Bush and the State Department to come get this toxic garbage out of here as fast as they can," Mr. Santilus said.

But with a full menu of international affairs at the moment — including the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the continuing campaign against terrorism — not to mention the November elections at home — the Bush administration is unlikely to add Haiti to its plate.

While some level of diplomatic intervention is possible, experts say that the United States and other nations that are closely watching the situation may also be experiencing a level of "Haiti fatigue" after the military and financial resources that have been poured into this impoverished nation without many demonstrable results.

"They're sort of really tired that they have to come and rescue these people all the time," said Professor Marc Prou, executive director of the Haitian Studies Association at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, who nonetheless said that outside intervention is necessary before the crisis escalates.

He and others questioned the prospects of a successful mediation by Caricom or anyone else unless the main figures in Haiti's own political struggles do something first.

"There's no doubt that the situation is becoming more tense and more divisive and in need of genuine mediation and other concrete steps by the Haitian actors," said David Lee, chief of the Organization of American States mission here.

Many say that the first step must begin with the national police force, which critics have said that Mr. Aristide uses as a weapon to punish political enemies, and the band of armed gangs — known as *chimeres* after a fire-breathing monster from Greek mythology — that many say cause much of the violent lawlessness.

Although he has denounced the gangs, Mr. Aristide has been widely criticized for not doing enough to stop them.

Another priority, experts say, is for the president and the opposition — who have traded accusations about who has instigated the violence — to begin talking to each other, but the divisions between them are deep.

Two of the main opposition groups are the Democratic Convergence, led by former supporters of Mr. Aristide, and Group 184, a coalition of students, businessmen and other professionals whose name is derived from its original membership tally.

Many members of both are former Aristide supporters who fell out of favor. "He marginalized all those people," Professor Prou said. "So now it's payback time."

The retribution is being meted out daily in the protests in Port-au-Prince, where demonstrators chant in Creole, "Vle pa vle, fou'l ale," which roughly translates as, "Whether he wants to or not, he must go."

Mr. Aristide himself has often noted how in the turbulent 200-year history of his sad and beautiful nation, Haiti has endured 32 political uprisings or coups. But experts say his ouster is unlikely as long as he has the support of the national police.

As for another possible resolution to the crisis, Mr. Aristide's resignation, experts say that is even more remote.

"Aristide is a real hard head," Professor Prou said. "He's not going anywhere."