

Haitian Educator Beaten Up, But Not Beaten Down

By Nora Boustany

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Pierre-Marie Michel Paquiot does not know when he will walk again. The rector of the State University of Haiti, who was beaten by marauding thugs on campus last month, now must use a wheelchair. But he used his vocal cords effectively yesterday to signal that Haitian society is fed up with the tumultuous and contested presidency of **Jean-Bertrand Aristide**.

With his legs stretched out stiffly on extensions from his wheelchair, Paquiot spoke slowly and gravely about the situation. Aristide is the problem and no longer the solution, he said, adding that "the United States and other countries should stop pretending they don't know what is going on in Haiti."

Paquiot was among those who spoke out against a military coup that ousted Aristide in 1991. Aristide returned to office in 1994, but turmoil has swept Haiti since 2000, when Aristide's political party won legislative elections that observers have said were flawed.

The drumbeat of protest has risen steadily ever since. Riots have rocked Port-au-Prince, the capital, almost daily, and sit-ins and strikes are increasingly frequent. Paquiot sees it as his mission to publicly condemn the erosion of civil liberties.

On Dec. 5, thugs who support the government stormed the halls of the university, shooting and trampling students. Paquiot said he went to see what was happening and was in a room talking to students when the thugs stormed in, carrying clubs, bars and shotguns. One put a gun to his head, Paquiot said, and two others started beating his legs with metal bars. He fell to the ground and could not get up.

"I was hurt, I was a victim, but this is not an isolated case. What happened to me was nothing," he said. "They stomped on a girl student lying next to me, kicking her and walking over her body." A student who was in a melee the previous day was hit in the stomach with a tear gas canister, Paquiot said, and while the student was in the hospital, the canister "exploded inside of him."

Paquiot, who had been in hiding, was operated on in Haiti. He traveled to the United States on Jan. 12, stopping in Miami before heading for New Orleans with the help of the Miami-based Haitian Resource Development Foundation, a group of Haitian Americans. He was due to meet with the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, **Roger F. Noriega**, and others yesterday.

Paquiot's injury and the spread of violence into the inner sanctum of higher education have united Haitian civil society against the arbitrary violence used by Aristide to crush opponents of his monopoly on power, according to several Haiti experts.

Paquiot, a mathematician and physicist, has vowed to return to Haiti as soon as he can walk and resume his job as an elected university official.

"I cannot tell you what kind of role I will play in the future," Paquiot said in an interview yesterday after speaking at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "In life sometimes you have to take responsibilities you never thought of before. You just go ahead and carry out what you see is your duty.

"There is a university council, we are not a political party. But we are called upon to use our moral authority. . . . If something goes wrong, we say it, and if something is done right, we say it," he said. "There is no point in being for or against someone. This is about principles. The university has to be respected, and we had addressed a letter to the nation asking Aristide to leave office. This violence is no longer acceptable. The most important thing we intellectuals can do is to denounce what is going on."

"Haitian society is so suspicious and so politically charged that they believe and trust no one," said **Almami Cyllah**, Haiti director at the International Foundation for Election Systems. The inflexible position of Haitian opposition leaders contesting Aristide's presidency and his refusal to conduct a second round of elections has bedeviled negotiations for a resolution by the Organization of American States.

James R. Morrell, executive director of the Haiti Democracy Project, said at CSIS that the "critical job of nation-building and building up institutions in Haiti was left unsupported and unprotected" as gangs slowly took over in the late 1990s. The professionally trained police force became politicized, and Haiti's "national chief of police was driven out of the country by death threats in 1999," Morrell said.

Paquiot said that "Aristide might be a dictator, but he cannot keep you from talking.

"When he was ousted by the military in 1991, as a matter of principle we asked for his return," Paquiot said. "We demonstrated. I had strong hopes in 2001 when I met him that things would change. Now we have the right to talk, he cannot stop that. It is a process."