

# 'Political Rapes' of 1991 Still Haunt Haitian Democracy Activists

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Washington Post Foreign Service  
Sunday, March 21, 2004; Page A18

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- When the men stopped beating her, the night was silent. For an instant, Immacula Deluce said, she wondered if she was dead. Then she was overwhelmed by the pain and the shame of having been raped repeatedly by three men, their faces covered by black hoods.

For six months after her ordeal in 1991, she said, she roamed the streets, blinded from the beating. "When they found me in the street, I was crazy. They took me to the country and did leaf medicine for me and treated me," said Deluce, 38, a proud, pretty woman with silver lipstick, who leads a support group for Haitian women who have been raped.

Deluce and her group said the rapes were politically motivated following a 1991 military coup, the first time that President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forced into exile. He was ousted again three weeks ago.

In the three years until the United States restored Aristide to office in 1994, survivors' groups and human rights activists said, thousands of women became rape victims as military and paramilitary groups terrorized people they considered Aristide supporters.

The women's group, representing some of those who were raped, now wants to call the attackers to justice. But because many women cannot identify their rapists because of the hoods, the group has opted to prosecute the top leaders of the military who they contend encouraged the rapes. Aristide disbanded the military when he returned to Haiti in 1994.

Judy Dacruz, a human rights lawyer working in Port-au-Prince, said the women seek to charge Raoul Cedras, commander of the brutal armed forces that overthrew Aristide in the 1991 coup, and Emmanuel Constant, who commanded the feared death squad known as FRAPH, the Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti.

"We are trying to bring the case on common responsibility against army forces and paramilitary groups," Dacruz said.

But justice has always been hard to find in Haiti, especially during periods of political turmoil. Among the rebel leaders who contributed to Aristide's departure into exile the second time, on Feb. 29, were Guy Philippe, a onetime member of the army who has previously been charged with plotting against the government, and Louis Jodel Chamblain, another former leader of FRAPH, convicted of murder and human rights abuses.

Cedras, who was forced from power when the U.S. military escorted Aristide back to Haiti in 1994, is reported living in Panama City. Constant has been living in Queens, N.Y.

The Haitian women and the human rights lawyers contend the rape victims were targeted because they were leaders in Haiti's democracy movement. "It was a way to destabilize women from the movement to bring back Aristide, to break the mental strength of that movement so they can forget about President Aristide," said Deluce, seated in a lawyer's office in Port-au-Prince, wearing a plain black dress with white flowers, her hair pulled back. "I hope some people will be captured and punished."

According to human rights reports, hundreds of Haitian women were disfigured, some with machetes that were used to slice off their arms or parts of their faces. Many were tortured, some said they were forced into incest and sometimes their husbands and children were killed in front of them, according to the reports. Many fled into the hills.

Brian Concannon, who works on human rights issues with Dacruz, said the rapes were "massive, systematic and designed to terrorize and intimidate the pro-democracy movement."

"The perpetrators maximized the terror through sadism -- multiple rapes, forcing family members to watch, forcing incest and raping young girls and pregnant women," he said.

The activists said the case contemplated by the Haitian women is unprecedented. "If the Haitian women succeed with their campaign to prosecute those responsible for their rapes, including the top military and paramilitary leaders," Concannon said, "they will provide both an inspiration and a road map for other national prosecutions. The initiative is highly ambitious. No national justice system has successfully prosecuted top leaders for political rapes."

Dacruz said pursuing the case against Constant and Cedras will be difficult. "In Haiti, it is hard to prosecute rape," she said. "It is about money. First you have to convince a judge to take the case."

Here, justice is often elusive, made more difficult for the poor and nearly impossible for those who do not speak French, the human rights lawyers said. The poor speak Creole. Most trials are conducted in French.

"Not only are they poor and trying to challenge the powerful," Concannon said, "but they are also entering a place traditionally hostile to women."

In addition, without money for bribes, it is difficult to get any kind of justice in the current legal system, the activists said.

Privat Precil, director general of the Justice Ministry, conceded in a recent interview that Haiti's judicial system is corrupt. Precil said Aristide, to try to reduce corruption, raised

judges' salaries from less than \$500 a month to something closer to \$800 a month. "But it's not enough," Precil said. "Sometimes, the one having more money is the more corrupt. It's about education and ethics. I don't think raising money will solve the problem."

Precil said Haitians often apply their own system of justice outside the court system. "When it is not clear about what will happen in justice, they give themselves justice," he said. "People will take justice in their own hands. The fastest way is to kill. . . . Whenever there is a political crisis you have the propensity to kill each other. We have a long history of violent crimes. We don't have capital punishment. We are against killing by law."

The criminal code in Haiti classifies rape as an "offense against morals," and conviction for rape brings a shorter sentence than one for assault. In Haiti, the rape of a woman who is not a virgin is considered less important than the rape of a virgin, because in the former case the woman is deemed to have lost no honor.

As a new government is formed following the latest political violence and instability, the women in the group say it is unclear whether those who were raped after the 1991 coup will find justice.

In the darkened law office in Port-au-Prince, several women sat alongside Deluce. They want to serve as witnesses in the political rape cases, but identified themselves by using only their initials, fearing reprisals if they speak out.

"It was for the return of democracy that we were raped," said M. V., 44, a tiny woman wearing a black print dress and pearls. "We want the minister of justice to give us justice. We don't want this to happen again for women of Haiti."

Another woman, E. V., 49, wore a blue floral dress, her hands folded in her lap. She said she was considered a leader in the pro-Aristide movement of the early 1990s in Cite Soleil, a Port-au-Prince slum.

"They came to my house and said they were going to kill me," E. V. said. "Then five men raped me, then they left me for dead. I was forced to walk home because I couldn't stay on the streets. The next day, I took all my children and left." She went into hiding along with hundreds of men and other women.

She said her oldest child was only 7 years old when he watched her being raped. The younger children were too young to know, and for that she is grateful. She said her husband pleaded for them to stop, but the soldiers, wearing black hoods, took her away and dropped her in Titanyen, a mass burial site, and left her there. She said she screamed from the black hole and a stranger came to her rescue.

"I still have trouble. I still have pain in my head," the woman said. "What we need most is justice."

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