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Chaos Becomes a Way of Life in a Rebel-Held Haitian City

By LYDIA POLGREEN

GONAÏVES, Haiti, Feb. 14 — When Roselene Guillaume saw her husband's bullet-riddled body, she did not need to be told what to do.

She packed up the few rags of clothing that her six children — three sets of twins, ages 2 to 6 — could carry and sent them on foot with her aunt to a village 20 miles north of here. She wanted them out of this city, the center of a violent uprising aimed at overthrowing President Jean-Bertrand Aristide that threatens to plunge the country into chaos.

But Ms. Guillaume, 20, her belly swollen with her seventh child, refused to go with them. She would not leave the body of her husband, Chaolin, who was killed, she said, by pro-Aristide militants as he tried to make his way home here during the uprising.

"I have to bury my husband here, in his home, where Aristide killed him," Ms. Guillaume said, her eyes vacant as she stared into a street covered with a shimmering carpet of ash and broken glass. "But we are very afraid."

Political strife has gripped the country since a disputed parliamentary election in 2000, and huge opposition marches over the past several months have intensified calls for Mr. Aristide to leave office. Earlier this month, the crisis boiled over into violence as armed rebel groups attacked police stations in as many as a dozen cities across the country. More than 40 people have died in violent clashes.

In Gonaïves (pronounced goh-nah-EEV), an opposition force wrested control from the police on Feb. 5.

Fear and chaos have become a way of life here, a critical crossroads in Haiti's revolutionary heartland between the country's two largest cities, Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haïtien.

In recent days, the leader of the uprising here has indicated that he has the support of sinister figures from this country's violent past.

It is unclear whether this support will actually materialize, though some foreign journalists have reported that they spoke with these men in Haiti in recent days. But the possibility of their involvement, coupled with the government's weak and disorganized security arrangements, could take the conflict in Haiti, which has until now been limited

to uprisings by small armed groups in cities across the country, to another level, experts say.

At this point the rebel group in Gonaïves, which calls itself the Artibonite Resistance Front, a more palatable name than the Cannibal Army, as the group was formerly known, appears not to have massed enough militants to take on the police and pro-Aristide militants in other major cities. But with only a small police force and militant gangs that sometimes serve as an auxiliary government force, Mr. Aristide does not appear to have enough manpower to take back Gonaïves by force, though government officials have said a plan to do just that is in the works. As a result, Gonaïves is likely to simmer in its current misery for some time.

It was here in Gonaïves that the slaves who shook off Napoleon declared their independence from their imperial oppressors, leading to the founding of the first black republic here 200 years ago. It was also here that the revolt that overthrew the brutal dictatorship of the Duvalier family began in the 1980's. Haiti has experienced 30 coups since its independence.

The man who has placed himself in charge of this city in an effort to force Mr. Aristide from office is Butteur Metayer. His brother, Amiot, once led a pro-government gang, but they switched sides last fall after Amiot Metayer was killed, and they accused the government of the killing.

On Feb. 5, the group repelled the police here, and Butteur Metayer declared from behind his customary dark glasses that the city had been liberated.

"We have freed Gonaïves," Mr. Metayer said at an impromptu news conference in a ramshackle schoolhouse at the edge of the seaside slum that is his base.

"We have a plan to take St.-Marc," he continued, the smell of rum heavy on his breath, referring to the port city 20 miles south of here that rebel groups and government forces have now battled over for more than a week. "Then we will march to the capital. And there is only one goal when we get to the capital: the palace."

Mr. Metayer refused to say how many men he commands, but he contended that reinforcements had arrived from the Dominican Republic, led by two men feared for their sinister roles in the army and the police force in the past.

Louis-Jodel Chamblain, a former soldier who led death squads in the late 1980's and was accused of committing atrocities after a 1991 military coup is gathering a force of men, Mr. Metayer said. Guy Philippe, a former police chief whom the government accused of trying to overthrow it in 2002, is also on the ground near Gonaïves, he said.

"This is beginning to shape up to what I call an unholy alliance," said Robert Maguire, an expert on Haitian politics at Trinity College in Washington who is on cordial terms with Mr. Aristide.

"You now have the real possibility of civil war, and you have a government that is facing depleted capacity to resist this because of the weakness of the police force."

With a demoralized police force of fewer than 5,000 men, Mr. Aristide has struggled to retain control of the country and relied heavily on armed gangs loyal to him to retain control in places where the police have been unable or unwilling to do so. The weakness of the police and the violence of the street gangs have diplomats here concerned that all order could break down very quickly.

"The police could melt away and he could unleash the *chimères*," said a senior Western diplomat in Port-au-Prince, using the Haitian name for pro-government gang members. "The government is more and more dependent on gangs. It is a very fragile situation."

The armed uprising more than a week ago in this important seaside city choked off a crucial north-south highway that links Port-au-Prince and Cap Haitien and has transformed Gonaïves into a bubbling cauldron of misery, and thousands of the city's 200,000 residents have fled.

With the road blocked by machine-gun wielding rebels, the price of rice, the staple food here, has doubled.

Children fish gasoline out from the underground tank below a bombed-out Esso gas station with tin cans attached to wires, selling it for as much as \$20 a gallon. Burned car chassis and all manner of trash — baby carriages, tires and bed frames — block roads throughout the city.

The hospital's bullet-riddled gates are open, but its wooden doors are shut tight. The Cuban doctors who normally staff it are afraid to show up for work, hospital workers said. International aid agencies said they cannot safely bring supplies to the city.

But it is a measure of the misery of life in Haiti even under the best circumstances that people here say things were not much better when the government was in control.

"Even before now we had no food, no money," said Dieuline Menard, a 17-year-old student who has not been to school in months because of the chaos gripping the city. "If Aristide stays or goes, we still will not eat."

In a country where millions live on less than a dollar a day, perched precariously on a knife-edge between survival and utter despair, international aid agencies warned that they were struggling to get food to more than a quarter million people who rely on them to be able to eat in the country's arid north.

There, in the areas around Cap Haitien, farmers struggle to coax crops from rocky bits of land between barren mountains. Further instability could force the number of people needing food to as many as 800,000, according to Guy Gavreau, country representative

for the World Food Program, which plans to send a barge loaded with rice to Cap Haitien to feed schoolchildren and pregnant mothers in the countryside.

"These people are entirely dependent on food aid," Mr. Gavreau said. "They are extremely vulnerable."

Opposition civic groups in Port-au-Prince have tried to distance themselves from the violent uprisings, particularly the one in Gonaïves. But the government has been equally forceful in asserting that the groups are connected.

[In the capital on Sunday, more than a thousand opposition protesters took to the streets to demonstrate against the government, in the first opposition march since the uprisings began. A march planned for last Thursday was called off when pro-government militants threw rocks and menaced protesters as police officers stood by.

[But on Sunday the police were out in force, keeping opposition groups and government supporters apart to avoid violent confrontations. Sporadic gunfire erupted in the city and the march broke up shortly after noon when an opposition leader went on the radio and told his supporters to go home.]

In a news conference last week, Prime Minister Yvon Neptune said the rebel group in Gonaïves was "a group of terrorists linked to the opposition," and that the city's population "has been taken hostage by an armed group."

Jean-Claude Bajeux, a former member of Mr. Aristide's cabinet and a longtime human rights advocate in Port-au-Prince who now supports the opposition, said the government's contention was disingenuous given that the uprising in Gonaïves consisted largely of former Aristide supporters who said they received their weapons from Mr. Aristide with instructions to control and intimidate opposition civic groups there.

"Power that has fallen into delinquency wants to have its own law," Mr. Bajeux said. "It is for that reason that Aristide lies and kills."

Indeed, the current crisis is in many ways one of Mr. Aristide's own making, said a senior Western diplomat in Port-au-Prince. By arming the rebel groups and politicizing the country's police force by appointing political cronies rather than professional managers to run it, Mr. Aristide weakened the only legitimate defense he had.

"The chickens are very much coming home to roost here," the senior diplomat said.

In Gonaïves on Saturday, Mr. Metayer said very much the same thing. "We are fighting Aristide with the weapons he gave us," Mr. Metayer said. "He gave us guns to stop the opposition, but now we oppose him."

