

Aristide: U.S. agents forced me to flee

White House calls claims 'nonsense'

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WASHINGTON -- A day after a U.S.-chartered plane spirited him from his strife-torn country to Africa, exiled Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide charged Monday that the United States had forced him to leave in what he described as a "coup d'etat" and "kidnapping."

Bush administration officials fervently denied the charges, but the accusations from Aristide and his allies in Congress and elsewhere threw the White House on the defensive and loomed as a potentially troublesome complication in the effort to steer the impoverished country into a new order after nearly a month of unrest.

At the United Nations, some diplomats expressed uneasiness, fearing their quick approval Sunday night of a Security Council resolution supporting an international peacekeeping effort was beginning to look more like an internationally sanctioned coup.

"Aristide was a democratically elected president who responded positively to a political solution that the opposition rejected," Algerian Ambassador Abdallah Baali said, referring to a power-sharing deal Aristide had agreed to but Haitian opposition leaders had rejected. "But the pressure was not put on the opposition. It was put on him."

Aristide, speaking from a government compound in the Central African Republic, said that, contrary to what U.S. officials have said, he agreed to go into exile only after U.S. officials told him they would not protect him from the rebel forces that were preparing to overrun the capital.

In an interview with CNN, Aristide said that he saw the U.S. military "surround the airport, the palace, my house. . . . They used pressure to push me out. That's why I call it again and again a coup d'etat, a modern way to have a modern kidnapping."

Aristide said he got on a U.S. plane but didn't know his destination. "They told us that 20 minutes before they landed in Central African Republic."

White Press Secretary Scott McClellan called Aristide's accusations "nonsense."

"Conspiracy theories do nothing to help the Haitian people move toward a better, more free and more prosperous future," McClellan said.

U.S. officials have said that Aristide asked for Washington's help in leaving when he realized Saturday night that he could not safely stay. They maintained that Aristide approached U.S. officials about 9 p.m. Saturday to inquire about help, and by midnight had agreed to leave and to sign a letter of resignation.

But in statements throughout the day, Aristide and supporters including Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., and Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., -- who spoke to him by phone -- insisted the story was quite different.

Rangel, after meeting with U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan and five other members of the Congressional Black Caucus at the United Nations in New York, said Aristide's resignation letter had actually been dictated to him by American officials.

Asked if Aristide was actually kidnapped, Rangel replied: "That's subjective. You can either stay and get shot, or leave with the military. He chose to leave with the military. . . . But it was against his will."

Waters, in a news conference in Los Angeles, said, "I'm convinced that our country has been involved in a regime change."

In his CNN interview, Aristide said that his resignation letter had been doctored.

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Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, asked by reporters if Aristide had been "virtually kidnapped," grinned at the question.

"I would be amazed if that were the case," Rumsfeld said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell on Monday offered details of Saturday night conversations involving U.S. officials and Aristide, and acknowledged they discussed whether he would be safe in remaining in Haiti.

Powell said the first call received by U.S. officials at midevening was from Aristide's hired security force. "And there was a question about their ability to continue protecting him," Powell said.

Powell said this led to Aristide asking U.S. officials about "the possibility of departure," and whether the Americans would protect his property, and the property of his ministers, and whether they would allow him to pick where he would go.

"We gave him answers to these questions, positive answers," Powell said.

After he spoke to his wife, Aristide again contacted Powell and his aides. Aristide said it was his own decision "based on what his security people were also telling him about the deteriorating situation, that he should leave," Powell said.

He added that "it would have been better for members of Congress who have heard these stories to ask us about the stories, before going public with them."

However, Congressional Black Caucus members criticized Powell for failing to divulge discussions concerning Aristide's personal safety sooner.

Rangel said "this information about Aristide asking to leave the country and that his life was in danger was never shared with us."

Meanwhile, some members of the Congressional Black Caucus and the TransAfrica Forum, an advocacy group, urged congressional hearings to probe what happened in the course of the resignation. Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Calif., said questions would be raised at a House International Relations Committee hearing this week.