

Haitians welcome rebel leader

Capital celebrates: U.S. creates council of eminent citizens to organize elections

Sue Montgomery and Steven Edwards

CanWest News Service

March 2, 2004

PORT-AU-PRINCE and at the UNITED NATIONS - For the first time in months, perhaps years, Haiti's capital erupted in joy yesterday as tens of thousands of jubilant dancing and singing people descended a main street and poured into the square outside the presidential palace, cheering the departure of Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Carrying lime branches -- a symbol of freedom and joy since the fall of the notorious Duvalier regime in 1986 -- Haitians thrust their fists in the air and yelled, "Happy New Year!"

They shouted for their despised and corrupt President to be tried for crimes against his people, and cheered the swift retreat of his hated armed gangs, the chimeres, that had terrorized them for so many years.

Under a bright blue sky, they sang freedom songs and half-ran, half-danced along the street in a manner reminiscent of people in South African townships.

Rebel leader Guy Philippe, accompanied by 70 rebels, entered the city in triumph in a convoy to be greeted by shouts of "Liberty!"

As dozens of insurgents packing an eclectic array of weapons dating to the Second World War swaggered around a posh hotel, Mr. Philippe met members of the political coalition that opposed Mr. Aristide. They were joined by rebel commander Louis-Jodel Chamblain, a former death squad leader and convicted killer.

Mr. Philippe, who returned to lead the revolt from neighbouring Dominican Republic where he fled in 2000 amid charges he was plotting a coup, said he planned to make preparations for the new president, former Supreme Court Justice Boniface Alexandre, to assume office as called for in the constitution.

In Washington, the Bush administration scrambled to create a council of "eminent" Haitians to fill a power vacuum and poured in Marines to restore order. France and Canada also have troops on the ground and are expected to send more soon.

The dozen council members will organize early elections while up to 2,000 Marines will back police in disarming rebels, U.S. officials said.

The United States is set to almost double its force to at least 450 Marines in the Caribbean nation. The Marines, the beach-head for a UN-backed international peacekeeping mission expected to total about 5,000, is much smaller than the 20,000 troops used when the United States restored Mr. Aristide to power a decade ago.

Haiti had a significant army in 1994, which was dissolved by Mr. Aristide on his return.

Washington also wants to quickly shift control in Haiti to other countries so it can concentrate on troop commitments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Marines were expected to initially form the bulk of the peacekeepers endorsed by the United Nations and gradually give way to police reinforcements and allow other nations to take the lead, said Colin Powell, the U.S. Secretary of State.

U.S. diplomats were working to form a commission made up of the opposition, the government and the international community to install the council within days .

Washington was focusing on forming the commission with Mr. Aristide's interim successor, Mr. Alexandre, Yvon Neptune, the Haitian Prime Minister, and probably a representative from the Caribbean bloc, CARICOM.

The council of elders would arrange presidential and parliamentary elections and regroup Haitian police.

Haiti's constitution says elections must be held within three months to replace Mr. Aristide.

Visiting the United Nations in New York, Paul Martin, the Prime Minister, said Canada's troops are stretched "very thinly" but he believed there was enough manpower to help quell Haiti's latest crisis.

"We do have the capacity to make our contribution to the Haitian situation and it is something I believe we must do," he said.

But managing the Caribbean chaos is going to take longer than an estimated three months of help from troops and police, Mr. Martin said after meeting Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General.

"It is our belief that it will go beyond that," he said, adding Canada is obliged to help, given its large Haitian population and the fact it is the only other French-speaking country in the hemisphere.

"A considerable number of countries have offered troops. Canada is willing to do its part."

There were no details about how many troops might go or when. David Pratt, the Defence Minister, was considering specific options.

Mr. Pratt, who was in Moose Jaw, Sask., said Canada is working closely with the United States and France to determine exactly what is needed in Haiti. But it will be several days before any decision is made on how many troops Canada will send.

Mr. Pratt, who was touring a NATO flight training base in Moose Jaw, said he was not concerned about the Canadian military being stretched thin.

"I'm satisfied, based on conversations I've had with the chief of defence staff, that we're in good shape that way, that we'll be able to offer a meaningful, relevant contribution to this force."

© National Post 2004

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2003 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest Global Communications Corp. All rights reserved.
Optimized for browser versions 4.0 and higher.

