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AVRIL'S CRACK-DOWN IN HAITI SHOULD COME AS NO SURPRISE

- Kiss free and fair elections goodbye; but Bush won't send in the Marines
- Last weekend's arrests and expulsions are only the most recent abuses in Haiti's deteriorating rights situation under Lt. Gen. Prosper Avril
- State Department finally condemns abuses, but in subdued language, as was the case with the former brutal rule of Gen. Henri Namphy in 1987
- Bush's Interamerican Bureau continues same failed Haitian policy as did its predecessor under Elliot Abrams

COHA STATEMENT ON POLITICAL SITUATION IN HAITI

Even before last weekend's dramatic events, Haiti's transition to democracy was palpably faltering, a trend that was obvious to all except the Department of State. For months, the State Department could be counted on as viewing Lt. Gen. Prosper Avril, the country's strongman, as the enigmatic man in the middle of conspiracies and complots, who still could be counted on to usher in democracy. But despite Avril's pious proclamations of his desire for constitutional rule, throughout most of his tenure his hostile intentions regarding a transition to democracy were there to easily be seen. Unfortunately, the State Department refused to open its eyes to reality and continued to view Avril as the man who could bring democracy to Haiti, despite his violent acts directed against opposition leaders.

When civilians such as the three supporters of former civilian President Leslie Manigat were killed last Nov. 18, the government sat on its hands. But Friday's murder of Col. Andre Neptune of the 1,100-member Presidential Guard, and his family, now has been seized upon by Avril as an excuse to viciously attack his longstanding critics as well as those of his predecessors, Gen. Henri Namphy and the Duvalier dynasty. The weekend's arrests, beatings, and exile of at least seven such diverse and important figures as Dr. Louis Roy, Hubert Ronceray, Max Bourjolly, Aby Brun, Dr. Sylvain Jolibois, Michel Legros, and Max Montreuil, as well as the detention of Serge Gille, and the flight into hiding of Sylvio Claude and Gerard Phillipe Auguste, sets the stage for Avril to either call off the scheduled October presidential elections, or to permit only himself or tightly controlled, military-backed candidates to run.

DEMOCRATIC LAPSES A FREQUENT OCCURENCE

Haiti's political situation has been deteriorating for months. The State Department has been intent on sustaining a failed policy of a gradual, military-supervised transition to democracy, whose chance of success effectively died with the election day 1987 massacre of 34 voters by forces of the Haitian strongman Gen. Namphy. Since the flight of Baby Doc Duvalier in Feb. 1986, Foggy Bottom optimistically looked for reform where there were only the most token gestures to be seen, while treating Haiti, under the leadership of Namphy and Avril, in a spirit of condescension that it hardly deserves because of the bravery and courage of its opposition leaders. Looking back 12 months since its inauguration, and considering all of the violence in Haiti that has occurred during that time, apparently the Bush administration is less moved by bloodied and beaten Haitian democrats than by members of the Panamanian opposition during the Noriega era. The best that the State Department could do in condemning the latest round of Avril-sponsored violence was to note that it "put at risk the democratic transition in Haiti."

With radio stations being closed, and a well-known reporter murdered for telling some jokes over the radio station, and with the dumping of human excrement in front of the doors of opposition political parties, Gen. Avril is presiding over the abasement of Haiti. The international community should take immediate action to declare a cordon sanitaire around the country, with all aid being cut off.

Corruption and harassment of political opponents has been on the increase for months

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under Avril. The reformist officers who overthrew Namphy and installed Avril in Sept 1988 were purged months ago. Three leftist opponents of Avril have been imprisoned since they were arrested and displayed on state television in November.

COHA ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL SITUATION IN HAITI

Many months ago, most Haitian democrats had grown deeply mistrustful of Avril's 16-month old regime. They are now equally doubtful of Avril's willingness or ability to implement the Provisional Electoral Council's (CEP) timetable of elections leading to a presidential vote next October. Avril had maintained the pretense that his was only a provisional government and that he eagerly anticipated the transition to civilian rule. But a steady series of negative events belied these assurances: the harsh treatment of leaders of the National Assemblage (a coalition of progressive military officers, trade unionists, and political groups); continuing army abuses and corruption; and the killing of supporters of former civilian President Leslie Manigat, whose ouster resulted in Avril taking power. After the country's democratic political leaders had begun the process of building a potentially powerful election coalition, ex-Duvalierists and Avril supporters in the military began to worry over the prospects of the opposition taking office, which could challenge their corrupt practices. As a result, political harassment of opposition parties increased. In December, Louis Dejoie was the first presidential candidate to go into hiding for fear of his life.

The election timetable originally was supposed to begin in April 1990, with local, municipal and legislative elections taking place, one province at a time, and presidential elections scheduled for Oct. 17. A runoff on Nov. 11 would take place if required, with the new president being inaugurated in Feb. 1991. But the staggered schedule was shelved in favor of simultaneous elections, if in fact they are ever staged.

Today Haiti is an economic basket case, with not a single member of the Avril cabinet competent in the field that they are supervising. The failure of Avril's trip last week to Taiwan, where he searched for loans and investments, and the present total lack of foreign exchange, are examples of how the strongman has run the country's economy into the ground.

ELECTORAL COUNCIL UNDER FIRE

Criticism of the CEP and its original timetable came from most opposition political parties. A number of opposition members demanded that the abundant technical difficulties showing up in the electoral process be quickly addressed. The CEP was in the process of slowly making these changes before the current round of violence took place.

Mark Bazin, the presidential candidate of the Movement for the Establishment of Democracy in Haiti, said at the time that he had hoped for something better, but would abide by the CEP's rules. He is considered by some to be the candidate most favored by Washington because of his credibility as an anti-Duvalierist as well as his free-market economic stance.

AVRIL REPRESSES DISSENT

The leader of the Haitian Christian Democrats, Sylvio Claude, became increasingly critical of the entire Avril government, including the CEP. He now has gone into hiding as a result of the crack-down. The National Assemblage rejected the electoral schedule altogether, calling for a massive tax boycott to protest the current government and its grossly inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy.

Before the current round of violence, the most recent incident that sparked heated protest was the Nov. 1 arrest of three leading members of the opposition group National Assemblage. Accused of plotting an insurrection against Avril, the three men who were detained were Auguste Mesyeux of the Autonomous Organization of Haitian Workers [CATH], Evans Paul of the Confederation for Democratic Unity, and ex-officer Etienne Martineau of the September 17 People's Organization. After the visibly beaten men were displayed on state television, the only viewing of them since then was at their initial court appearance on Nov. 15. In protest, 23 labor organizations, including CATH, paralyzed Port-au-Prince with a general strike on Nov. 7 and 8. Such strikes had become one of the opposition's main weapons against the Avril government, though a march scheduled for Nov. 29 failed to draw much support.

CEP: A CONTROVERSIAL BODY

In defending its handling of the scheduled election, the Provisional Electoral Council insisted that its plans were based on a survey of more than 3,000 Haitians. Admitting that most wanted the elections to take place more rapidly, the head of the CEP, Dr. Louis Antoine Auguste, said more time was needed to set up permanent voter rolls and allow the Council to use its meager resources more effectively.