

Throwing Gasoline on Haiti 's Fires

By Brian Concannon Jr. | July 14, 2005

On June 23, the U.S. State Department briefed members of Congress on its plan to distribute thousands of handguns to the Haitian National Police, continuing a program that sent 2,657 weapons to Haiti for the police last year, despite an embargo.

Haiti's citizens, especially the poor majority, are suffering under an epidemic of armed violence. Kidnappings and gun battles, between gangs, police and UN Peacekeepers have replaced the daily and nightly routine in downtown Port-au-Prince and many neighborhoods. In some areas, residents cannot leave for days, and spend nights praying that the bullets outside do not come through their thin walls. Almost everyone in the capitol alters their patterns of work, school, travel or sleep, to avoid being shot or kidnapped.

Arming police to help them fight crime may seem like a sensible approach to the insecurity. But although many Haitian National Police (HNP) officers are fighting crime at great personal risk- the force as a whole is a cause of the violence, not a solution.

The day of the Congressional briefing, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued a press release decrying the killing of innocent civilians during police fights with gangs. On April 27, Amnesty International denounced a police attack on a demonstration that killed five. In March the UN Peacekeepers started placing themselves between police and demonstrators because police had fired on a peaceful protest, in front of the UN and the media, on February 28. Amnesty's report noted that the "repression of this peaceful demonstration is not an isolated case," and denounced several police killings that have never been investigated.

For the past sixteen months, documentation of police abuses has stacked up like the bodies in Port-au-Prince's morgue. Human rights investigations have shown over and over that police routinely execute people suspected of supporting Haiti's ousted elected government, or being involved in crime, or simply being adolescent males from the wrong neighborhood.

This is not the work of a few rogue police officers, but a concerted policy from the top down. Police leadership encourages the violence by failing to discipline the perpetrators or even investigate abuses. The police actively cover up the crimes by routinely denying reports from journalists, human rights groups and the UN that the

killings even happened. When confronted with bodies, they claim that everyone killed was a "bandit."

Police officials have also integrated hundreds of members of Haiti's former army into the ranks, often into leadership positions, bypassing the rules for recruitment and promotion. Many of these former soldiers are themselves involved in killing and kidnapping, but they also sell or give weapons to their former comrades, who have illegally reconstituted the army.

Police officials also encourage irresponsible and illegal shooting by failing to control ammunition. In most countries, as in Haiti under the democratic governments, police officers are required to file a report each time they fire their weapons. Now firearms-discharge reports are no longer required. Some officers report criticism from supervisors for not shooting enough--going through ammunition too slowly indicates the officer is "soft on crime," or on political dissidents.

Most police stations, especially in urban areas, have a corps of attaches, men outside of the formal police hierarchy who do the killing that the regular units do not want to do. They are out of uniform, but obvious to any visitor.

The State Department acknowledges that the police force is involved in killings, but insists that guns will only be given to properly vetted and supervised officers, and that they will be accounted for. But experience provides little reason to believe that an undisciplined force will become disciplined by getting more guns. The HNP will not provide adequate supervision, because its whole structure--from the former soldiers to the attaches to the "see-no-evil" top brass--is designed to avoid the kind of accountability that control of weapons requires.

Discipline is unlikely to arrive from outside either. The UN Security Council did strengthen the UN Peacekeepers' authority over the police in June, but the increase was slight. Moreover, over the sixteen months that the UN and U.S. Marines have been watching over the HNP, the force has become less accountable, not more.



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The UN did announce investigations following some of the worst police massacres, including one in the Fort National neighborhood in October and a prison massacre in December. But no report has been released for either incident. If the foreign police and soldiers did not stop the HNP from misusing the guns they have now, it is hard to see how they will effectively monitor several thousand more weapons.

The House of Representatives realized that sending the Haitian police force more weapons is like dousing a fire with gasoline. Its response to the State Department plan was an amendment to a spending bill blocking the weapons transfer. The amendment made so much sense that it was passed only five days after the State Department briefing, and by a voice vote, meaning there was so little opposition that it was not worth counting the votes. The amendment's sponsor, Rep. Barbara Lee, declared that the HNP "are intimidating, murdering, and executing the poor and political opposition with weapons transferred free of charge from the United States to the Government of Haiti, and this is simply unacceptable."

It is now up to the Senate to show the same common sense by passing the House's amendment and making it official policy that fueling Haiti's killings is "simply unacceptable."

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