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Haiti: Government must act to disband armed groups

The Haitian government must act on its words and ensure that armed groups linked to local authorities are disbanded, said Amnesty International delegates who took first-hand testimony from key witnesses to the recent shooting incident in Hinche that left five people injured.

Following the violence at the peaceful demonstration and reports that the mayors of Hinche and Maissade were among the assailants, the Prime Minister, Jacques Edouard Alexis, reminded the mayors and other local officials that the Haitian National Police is the only legal security force. He also reminded them that any effort on their part to create their own armed forces would be considered illegal.

"The Haitian government has quite rightly declared the acts of violence as illegal," said Amnesty International delegates in Haiti. "We welcome the Prime Minister's words, but unless there is sustained pressure, their words will remain empty and there will be no action."

Amnesty International has expressed its concern at the appearance of armed groups acting on behalf of the mayors who intervene with no legal basis or control: "Several mayors have declared themselves in favour of taking law and order into their own hands. If there is no clamp-down, we greatly fear that the mayors will form their own militias," warned the delegation.

The demonstration on 2 November was organized by the Papaye Peasants' Movement (MPP) and members of the party of Convergence Démocratique (CD). The Haitian National Police was present, but was unable to stop the violence.

"We are concerned about the insufficient response by police during the disturbances, and we call on the Haitian National Police to carry out its duty to safeguard public security in a professional and impartial manner," said Amnesty International. "In the present political climate, this duty is all the more urgent," the delegates added, reminding the Haitian government of its obligations under domestic and international law to ensure the safety of its citizens.

Amnesty International delegates will be in Haiti until 13 November 2000, and they will continue to call on the government to set up a committee to shed light on the violence. During their visit, the delegates will be meeting with the local authorities to seek assurances that the armed groups responsible for the violence are immediately disbanded.

Background

The violence in Hinche on 2 November took place at the end of a day of confrontation between supporters of different political parties during which a member of Fanmi Lavalas was injured. At the end of the meeting between MPP and CD members, attended by several hundred people, assailants began throwing stones at the building. Other assailants waiting outside then opened fire on the participants as they fled onto the street. Two participants of the meeting and two passers-by were injured by bullets in front of the building. Another participant, Dieugrand Jean Baptiste, was wounded by a bullet inside the building. Chavannes Jean Baptiste's car, the director of MPP, was hit by two bullets as he was leaving the area.

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