

Growing Protests in Haiti: Thousands Demonstrate to Demand the Departure of President Martelly and MINUSTAH

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Thousands marched in the streets of Port-au-Prince on Apr. 15 to demand that President Michel Martelly step down. The day before, 50 protestors picketed outside the military headquarters of the 9,000-soldier occupation force, the United Nations Mission to Stabilize Haiti or MINUSTAH, demanding that the troops leave Haiti by the May 28, 2014 deadline set by the Haitian Senate one year ago. And on Apr. 16, hundreds of peasants on the southern island of Ile à Vache (Cow Island) are planning to march against the police occupation of their communities, as well as a government plan to evict them and turn their island into a tourist resort.

This is just a small sampling of the growing daily protests around Haiti which has many questioning whether Martelly will be able to serve out his five year term without resigning.

The flames of rebellion around Haiti were fanned this week by Martelly himself when he declared in the southern city of Aux Cayes: "I'm going to announce some bad news... We have been doing so much work around the country, that the state coffers don't have a penny."



On Apr. 14, for the second week in a row, 50 demonstrators rallied outside the gates of the UN military headquarters at the Port-au-Prince airport demanding that MINUSTAH leave by the May 28, 2014 deadline set by the Haitian Senate one year ago.

Despite unmistakable signs of massive government corruption since Martelly came to power in May 2011, the announcement came as a shock to the Haitian people. Former President René Préval left about \$1.5 billion in the treasury when he stepped down, according to former Sen. Jean Hector Anacasis.

On Apr. 2, the government reshuffled and, ironically, expanded to 43 ministers and secretaries of state. This makes it larger than the government cabinets, for example, in France (16), the United States (23), and Venezuela (29).

Furthermore, according to Sen. Moïse Jean-Charles, the Martelly government has burned through about \$3 billion in funds provided to Haiti through its PetroCaribe Accord with

Venezuela, under which the Haitian state puts 40% of the money paid for about 20,000 barrels of Caracas-provided oil a day into a special discretionary fund. The oil revenues must be paid back to Venezuela in 25 years at 1% interest.

Earlier this year, the Haitian government announced that 94% of funding for projects it has undertaken comes from the PetroCaribe fund.



On Apr. 15, thousands marched through Port-au-Prince to demand that Martelly step down. "KOD says elections are impossible with Martelly" says the sign held up.

Meanwhile, President Martelly has illegally taxed (i.e. without Parliamentary approval) millions of international money transfers to Haiti at \$1.50 each and international phone calls to and from Haiti at five cents a minute, which has generated hundreds of millions over the past three years. But the press and public don't know exactly how much is in this highly resented mountain of collected fees because it has never been clearly accounted for. (Government officials once trumpeted that it was being spent on education, but with angry unpaid teachers and unschooled students in the streets every week, they now admit it wasn't spent on that.)

Martelly also drastically hiked fees on passports and other government documents that Haitians must procure, generating more bitterness but also revenue which has only disappeared into a black hole.

"If Martelly now says the state coffers are empty, what did he do with what was in there?" asked Mirlande Manigat, the Secretary General of the Assembly of Progressive National Democrats (RNDP), who lost the Washington-rigged Mar. 20, 2011 run-off election to Martelly. "The public must demand a clear accounting."

Economist Camille Chalmers of the Haitian Platform to Advocate Alternative Development (PAPDA) called Martelly's remarks "totally irresponsible" and predicted they are the precursor to "a chaotic situation which suggests that the government cannot meet its obligations." The desperate plight of Haiti's hungry masses is likely to deepen, Chalmers said, especially in the arid Northwest which is already in the grips of a severe food shortage.

"President Martelly has all but admitted that he had been stealing money from the Haitian treasury and that now the public coffers have no more money," said Biron Odigé, a leader of the Patriotic Forces for Respect of the Constitution (FOPARK), which called for the Apr. 15 march along with the Patriotic Democratic Movement (MOPOD). "There are no funds to do anything in the country. So today, our conviction is reinforced. More people in this mobilization are becoming conscious of the struggle being waged today. There is no alternative: Martelly must step down."

Oxygène David, a leader of the Dessalines Coordination (KOD), a new party named after Haiti's founding father, said that elections now announced for Oct. 26 are impossible under Martelly and the UN military occupation.

“Martelly has proven that he is too corrupt to run a government, to hold Carnival, or especially to organize an election,” David said. “But he is just the hand connected to the imperialist arm, which is MINUSTAH. Ricardo Seitenfus, the former OAS [Organization of American States] Ambassador has made it clear that Washington and its allies, working through the OAS and UN, put Martelly in power. They will do the same thing again in any future elections they oversee. Therefore, if Haiti is to move forward and hold free, fair, and sovereign elections, both Martelly and MINUSTAH must go.”

Since Apr. 7, KOD has been holding a demonstration outside the MINUSTAH’s base at the Port-au-Prince airport every Monday morning. It is part of a larger coalition effort to mobilize international pressure to force the UN’s withdrawal from Haiti.

On Ile à Vache, the government has not backed down in the face of massive popular protests there since January. Following an interview he gave to *Haïti Liberté* last month, Kénold Alexis, a leader of the Organization of Ile à Vache Peasants (KOPI), came home from teaching in the island’s school on Mar. 27 to find his home had been ransacked by agents of the Haitian Police’s Motorized Intervention Brigade (BIM). Over 100 heavily-armed BIM agents now terrorize the 17-square-mile island, which used to have only two police officers.

“After the raid, I found that I was missing \$4,000 Haitian (US\$446) from where I had hidden it,” Alexis told *Haïti Liberté*. “My wife found she was also missing \$2,500 Haitian (US\$279).”

Last week, Haitian authorities issued an arrest warrant for Alexis because of his mobilizing against a May 10, 2013 government decree declaring the island of “public utility,” i.e. to be turned into hotels, golf courses, and casinos. Delegations from Port-au-Prince and other parts of Haiti are traveling to Ile à Vache to march in solidarity with the island’s 14,000 eviction-threatened residents in their demonstration planned for Apr. 16.

“If Haiti were a building, flames would be popping out from every window right now,” said Henriot Dorcent, another KOD leader. “Corruption, repression, impunity, and arrogance are coalescing to create a perfect storm which may well send Martelly packing, despite his well-honed art of buying off people. The next few months, as the economic and political scissors close, will prove decisive one way or the other.”

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