

Haiti: The Bel-Air Assault

Sektè Popilè Belè Commemorates Victims of Bel-Air Assault

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Two years ago, on September 30, 2005, the de facto government of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue and President Boniface Alexandre launched a fatal assault on the people of Bel Air, a popular district within Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince. Bel-Air residents speaking of the assault, widely considered it similar to the attacks that US soldiers have launched in Baghdad, Iraq.

A mass in memory of the victims of the assault, which Bel Air residents now refer to as "Operation Baghdad" was celebrated on Sunday at the Church of Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours, which is also the site of the Lady of Perpetual Help.

In attendance were Annette Auguste "So An", a folk singer and Fanmi Lavalas activist, many residents, victims and local Lavalassians as well as journalists of the international media. Also in attendance was Paul Denis, a leader of Organisation du Peuple en Lutte (OPL), an anti-Aristide political party.

Attendees were unsure if Denis was attending in an attempt to make peace with the people that his past actions had harmed so much or if it was purely a provocation. But in the church, in a communal atmosphere, there was a feeling of open dialogue, something that Haitian priest Gerald Jean-Juste called for last month.

Bel Air is a poor hillside district within Port-au-Prince. From Bel Air one can see the National Palace, the National Port Authority (APN) and other zones. It is also a zone of pilgrimage where people travel through to visit the well-known and beautiful church.

According to Bel Air residents, the de facto government's assault targeted those who called for the return of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, flown out of the country by US troops on February 29, 2004. Aristide maintains that he was taken against his will. An official investigation was never carried out by the OAS despite requests by CARICOM, numerous African countries, Venezuela and Cuba.

Aristide remains in exile in South Africa even though his former associate René Garcia Préval is president. Préval was Aristide's Prime Minister during his first presidential mandate of 1991-1995, who then won the presidency in 1996 with the broad support of the Lavalas movement. It was the first time the position was transferred in a legitimate and democratic manner since the world's first black republic was established in 1804.

However today when speaking with the residents of Bel Air, it is clear those who voted for Préval in February of 2006 believing he would facilitate the return of Aristide, are

disappointed. “Titid,” the name they give the former priest and president, remains popular. “Viv Retou Titid” is a common graffiti mark seen across Haiti’s urban poor districts.

Two young girls with Sektè Popilè Belè, an organization of Bel Air residents, placed wreaths at the base of the statue of the patron saint to thank her for the protection she gave them during the Latortue dictatorship – which, though solidly backed by the “international community,” lasted only two years thanks to persistent and courageous non-violent mobilizations. Large demonstrations by the poor residents were frequent throughout the period, even though they were often sniped at by security forces of the interim government.

Evens Elisma, a member of Sektè Popilè Belè, read a message of thanks but also of dissatisfaction:

“Today we gather in front of all the authorities local and international and everyone present at the feet of the Notre Dame of Perpetual Help who is the protective one and champion of peace in Haiti. We ask for health, work, education and vocational training this year. We thank the mothers of Bel Air, because they didn’t retreat when the de facto government asked them to leave the church which would have allowed them to use heavy weapons against the people. To all of them we say thank you. Sektè Popilè Belè organized this event because it marks the first birthday of the year of Peace, and the second birthday of the Baghdad Operation launched against the people of Bel Air.”

Sektè Popilè Belè stressed two other points. First Preval’s statement “Look at me in the eyes, I look at you in the eyes.” They responded that Preval’s expression should be directed at former allies of Aristide who betrayed the president and participated in the coup d’état of 2004 which cost Haiti thousands of lives and uprooted many more. Secondly, they stressed that the local population’s agreement with MINUSTAH to guarantee peace and security for Bel Air has not been honored by the UN soldiers.

Wadner Pierre contributes to HaitiAnalysis.com

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