

Haiti: U.N. MINUSTAH Forces Crack Down on Anti-Occupation Demonstrators

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It was tense in Port-au-Prince on Friday, Oct. 15. UN troops fired shots in the air and traded blows with a crowd of some 100 demonstrators gathered outside the UN base at the Port-au-Prince airport to protest the renewal of the UN Mission to Stabilize Haiti (MINUSTAH). Although the UN Security Council had already renewed MINUSTAH's mandate on Oct. 14, a coalition of grassroots and political opposition groups took to the streets to call for an end to the six-year military occupation which cost \$612 million last year but undermined, rather than ensured, the general population's security, the protesters said. It was the culmination of two weeks of different actions by the anti-occupation coalition.

Despite having been warned of the protest, UN soldiers seemed unprepared to handle the crowd which blocked the base's entrance, stopping traffic and spraying anti-UN slogans on official cars trying to enter. There have been many similar protests over the past few months, but Friday's clashes were some of the most intense seen here in recent weeks. At one point a UN security officer waded into the crowd sparking pushing and shoving. Blows were traded, followed by shots fired in the air by the Jordanian soldiers forming a cordon around the base. The reckless and possibly vindictive driver of a UN vehicle pushed a handful of journalists covering the demo, including myself and Al Jazeera's correspondent, into a trash-filled ditch. As UN security chiefs made calls asking for tear gas, reinforcements arrived in full riot gear and dispersed the crowd. Both chiefs covered up their UN identification and refused to call in the UN press officer.

The MINUSTAH first deployed in Haiti in June 2004 to take over from US, French and Canadian occupying troops which had helped oust Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide and install de facto Prime Minister Gerard Latortue's regime. Anti-occupation protests take place every year in the weeks before the mandate's mid-October expiration but resentment is even deeper this year in the wake of MINUSTAH's response to the Jan. 12 earthquake. Rather than helping to pull people from the rubble, UN forces focused on protecting facilities from "looting." Despite MINUSTAH being reinforced to more than 13,000 troops and armed police after the quake, rape inside the camps has quadrupled, and violence against internally displaced people is growing with many forcibly expelled from their camps. As Haiti enters its often-turbulent election season, Préval's former prime minister, candidate Jacques Edouard Alexis, has accused his former boss of distributing weapons in preparation for a campaign of intimidation.

Everywhere you go in this city there's evidence of the animosity many feel towards the UN presence. The ubiquitous graffiti slogans of "Down with the Occupation" or "Down with UN Thieves" reflect the population's opinion of the UN troop presence here.

As grassroots organizer and demonstrator Yves-Pierre Louis explains: "It violates the Haitian constitution and the UN charter which specifies that such a force is only necessary in a country which threatens international peace and security. Haiti is not at war... it does not produce atomic bombs, terrorists or drugs. So where is the threat?" Neither the officer in charge of the riot team nor MINUSTAH spokesman Vincenzo Pugliese made an official comment on the protest.

One of the reasons cited by the UN Security Council to renew the mandate was that the continued presence of UN forces would help to ensure a "credible and legitimate" vote on Nov. 28. But complaints are growing that the election is already unfair. As 45 members of the US Congress recently warned in a letter to US President Barack Obama, the exclusion of Aristide's Lavalas Family party, one of the few with any widespread popular support, along with 13 others makes the electoral process unconstitutional and undemocratic.

Oct. 15 was also the official beginning of political campaigning, but many Haitians living in camps insist they won't vote while under tarpaulins. They say they have participated in the democratic process, but twice seen their collective will subverted by coups d'état. With frustrations running high and many Haitians cynical that Préval's elections will bring improvements to their daily lives, the MINUSTAH might find Haiti especially hot this year if the people's simmering resentment turns to boiling rage against the soldiers and guns imported to keep them down.

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