

Haiti: Was the U.S. Military-Intelligence Complex Involved in the Murder of Oriel Jean, Former Security Chief for President Aristide?

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On September 2012, gunmen killed Oriel Jean, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's former security chief from 2001 to 2003, in Port-au-Prince. After misleading media reports and rumors, he was falsely accused of selling out Aristide when jailed in the U.S. for 30 months on charges of money laundering. After returning to Haiti in September 2013, he led a low-profile life running a construction company.

In 2001, as the George W. Bush administration began targeting Aristide officials like Oriel, a few dozen heavily armed paramilitary “rebels,” led by former army officer and police chief Guy Philippe and former death-squad leader Jodel Chamblain, began launching military raids from the Dominican Republic on the Police Academy on Jul. 28, 2001 and the National Palace on Dec. 17, 2001, both of which the Special Unit for Guarding the National Palace (USGPN), under Oriel’s direction, repulsed.

In 2002, using one of its usual political pressure tactics, the U.S. issued a list of Haitian government officials, including Oriel, to whom it would deny visas due to their alleged ties to Haitian drug traffickers. On Jun. 27, 2003, conservative Radio Métropole reported that Oriel had been “spotted” two days earlier leaving the Port-au-Prince international airport “incognito... with his entire family” for Canada, insinuating that he was fleeing the country and might be arrested by Canadian authorities. Oriel rebutted the report the same day in a telephone interview with Radio Kiskeya, saying he’d traveled to Montreal for no more than two weeks to seek medical attention for a bad knee, while his family had joined him for a vacation and to see relatives.

“Before you spread rumors, you should try to confirm the information,” Oriel complained to Kiskeya and the media in general. “There are simple calls you could make. My God, if I am going to leave for a few days, do I have to hold a press conference?”

Despite the interview, Oriel hastily flew back to Port-au-Prince on Jul. 1, 2003. But, with the U.S. tightening the political screws, it was decided he should resign as USGPN chief a few days later, just as Nesly Lucien had been forced to resign as police chief in March 2003.

Oriel continued to play a central but background role in Aristide’s security until the coup d’état of Feb. 29, 2004. Eight days later, armed with a visa and having received assurances from an official in the Canadian Embassy that he was welcome, Oriel flew from Punto Cana, Dominican Republic to Toronto, but he was arrested on arrival there. Canadian authorities told him they had cancelled his visa.

"My lawyer and I asked them how they could revoke someone's visa without telling them," Oriel told Haïti Liberté in a 2007 interview. "If someone has no right to enter Canada, you have to tell them that beforehand, not after they've taken a flight and arrived there... If they don't want me to enter, return me to the Dominican Republic or Haiti. I even asked them to return me to Haiti." According to Oriel, he and his lawyer had won this argument when the proceedings were interrupted, and the judge was presented with an extradition request from Washington. "My lawyer told me that I could fight the extradition request, but given the close relationship between Canada and the U.S., I had very slim chances of winning," Oriel said. "The legal fight, the judicial process, in Canada might take two or three years during which time I'd be detained, and if I did lose, the clock would start at zero again when I was extradited to the U.S.. So despite some opposition from my family and supporters in Canada, I decided not to fight the extradition request and to face my accusers in the U.S.."



Oriel Jean had to testify in the on-going investigation of radio journalist Jean Dominique's murder. Pro-Martelly officials are trying to blame former President Aristide for Oriel's Mar. 2 killing.

Oriel was extradited to the U.S. on Mar. 19, 2004. Prosecutors accused him of helping to offload drugs and demanding a cut of drug profits, charges Oriel vigorously denied. He insisted that he had taken part in no illegal activities or drug-trafficking whatsoever. "But my lawyer said to me: 'Listen son, you're not in Haiti anymore. Here in the U.S. they have this charge called conspiracy. Even if you personally weren't involved in anything, if you were at all associated with someone who is charged with a crime, and you even accepted five cents from him, there are ways to accuse you. Going to a trial is very risky given the demonization of [the] Lavalas [government]. I advise you to clear yourself, tell them what is true, what is not true, and make a deal.'"

Oriel followed the advice and admitted to knowing Haiti's three principal drug traffickers and having even accepted gifts from them. "Knowing they were drug traffickers, I should have kept my distance from them," he said. "I admitted my error and agreed to pay the price."

"As I did my job, I thought I was just dealing (en affaire avec) with the Haitian government," he added. "I didn't realize I was dealing with the U.S. government."

He made a deal to plead guilty to the charge of "Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering" and to testify against drug trafficker Serge Edouard, who was convicted for life in 2005.

"There are some who say I betrayed Aristide and said things about him and gave up other people, and that was why I got so little time," he said in his 2007 interview. "People can say anything. The truth is that I simply told them what I knew about the drug traffickers."

Released from prison in September 2006, with one year probation, Oriel went to work as a

parking lot attendant at Ft. Lauderdale Hollywood Airport, working the midnight to 8:00 a.m. shift. The U.S. State Department granted him an S visa, given to “alien witnesses and informants,” which had to be renewed every year following an interview.

Some years, U.S. officials would delay the renewal. One of those years was 2011. Following Aristide’s Mar. 18, 2011 return to Haiti from a seven-year exile, Oriel told Haïti Liberté that the Justice Department had sent a team of three investigators to ask him questions about Aristide. He said he provided them with no answers and sent a hand-delivered message to Aristide about the visit. In the same note, he gave Aristide some advice and warnings about people in his security team.

Finally, Oriel decided to leave Florida and return to Haiti in September 2012. Under the terms of his S visa, he would not be allowed back into the U.S., so he knew it was a one-way trip. “He didn’t want to stay in the U.S. any longer,” his wife Bettina told Haïti Liberté. “He was tired of working nights at the parking lot. He felt a lot of stress in the States from work, financial problems, and his immigration status and thought he could contribute more in Haiti. He was like a fish out of water.”

Back in Haiti, he went to work as Operations Director for Claudy Construction, owned by Claude Guillaume, who also owns Claudy Center Borlette, a popular private lottery in Haiti. “The Martelly government offered him a job, but he refused it,” said Oriel’s childhood friend Alix Sainphor. “He didn’t want to be involved in politics, and he didn’t want anything to do with Martelly.”

He maintained a low profile, but trouble came looking for him. Investigating Judge Ivickel Dabrézil subpoenaed Oriel, along with many others, including Aristide, to provide him with any information they had concerning the Apr. 3, 2000 murder of radio journalist Jean Dominique and his radio’s guardian Jean-Claude Louissaint.

Oriel said that he told Dabrézil what he knew about the matter, testimony that might implicate former Lavalas Family Senator and Aristide Foundation director Mirlande Libérous – now living in Florida – in the double killing.

“You have to understand that I have no power, no money, no team of lawyers to avoid talking to Dabrézil when he subpoenaed me,” Oriel told Haïti Liberté in 2013. “He is taking testimony from many people. I told him exactly what was said to me, what I did, and what I know. First, I don’t want to get in trouble by hiding something or telling a lie, and second, I think we should get to the truth in the Jean Dominique case. It’s gone too long unsolved.”

“Some people say I accused Aristide, which is not true,” he continued. “I was dealing with Mirlande. I don’t know where it went from there. She will have to give her testimony. But don’t blame me for just telling what I experienced.”

With this tension between certain former Lavalas Family leaders and Oriel, the stage was set for tragedy.

“He had received numerous death threats, particularly in February 2014,” said Sainphor. “At that time, he chose to leave Haiti and stay in the Dominican Republic for a month and a half. When he felt the danger had passed, he returned. But shortly before he was killed, he had received more threats.”

Some Haitian analysts question whether the hidden hand of the “laboratory,” as the U.S.

military/intelligence complex is called in Haiti, might be involved. "It could be that the laboratory killed two birds with one stone," said Henriot Dorcent of the party Dessalines Coordination (KOD). "They eliminate a very connected and experienced guy who was once a militant in and apparently remained sympathetic to the Haitian people's struggle for justice, democracy, and sovereignty. And at the same time, they lay the crime at Aristide's doorstep, thereby undermining the people's mobilization against the regime of President Michel Martelly, their puppet."

This hypothesis is given credence by the reaction of Martelly's former spokesman Guyler C. Delva, secretary general of SOS Journalists, who put out a Mar. 3 statement saying that Oriel had "constantly been the subject of death threats from individuals close to former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide whom he had accused of ordering the murder of Jean Dominique." In truth, even in a long interview with the former security chief which Delva made public on Mar. 10 on Radio Caraïbes, Oriel stopped short of directly accusing anybody of the crime but simply lays out a version of events and circumstances that are very suggestive. As Alix Sainphor said: "Guy Delva is lying, twisting and framing Oriel's words to further his own agenda."

Other pro-Martelly politicians, like Sauveur Pierre-Etienne of the Struggling People's Organization (OPL), have also charged that Aristide is behind Oriel's killing.

"Aristide had asked Mirlande and others to 'neutralize' Jean Dominique, whom he saw as a strong challenger for the presidency coming from Préval's party Kozepèp," Oriel told Haïti Liberté in 2013. "Did he mean for them to physically eliminate him? Frankly, I don't think so."

Oriel Jean's funeral is scheduled to be held on Mar. 11 at the Parc de Souvenir cemetery in Port-au-Prince, where he will be buried. He is survived by his wife, Bettina, his father, Odiyel, two sisters, Mamoune and Gladys, and four children, two boys and two girls, ranging in ages from 27 to 12.

It is perhaps fitting to close with Oriel's own words from his 2007 interview with Haïti Liberté: "The U.S. government and media has tried to paint me as a corrupt criminal, like Jean-Claude or François Duvalier, Ti Bobo, Bòs Pent, Luc Désir, etc. Those who know my trajectory, who know where I come from in the struggle since 1986, know that's not me. Those who have worked alongside me know that I'm a militant and an upright citizen (sitwayen de bien). However, I recognize that I'm not perfect, I made errors as everyone does, and I've paid for my errors and started anew. I have made my self-criticism (otokritik). But I have never been a trafficker, a drug dealer, a criminal. I cannot spend my whole life fighting against dictatorial power – people who kill others, who beat others – to become one of them today. My relationship with someone I should not have been friendly with, which got me into trouble, I don't deny that. I accept that. But to make me into something I'm not is not good. I'm very critical because I was in a key post, and I saw how the government finished badly, and I'm critical of many people. I'm critical of Aristide, I'm critical of myself, I'm critical of many people who were in power because I saw what happened in front of me and how in the end it was the people who were the victim. As I always say, I am a child of the people, I was raised among the people, and I will die among the people."

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