

Police Repression in Haiti: Thousands March Demanding President Martelly's Resignation - Hundreds Faint from Tear Gas

Martelly Dances on Dessalines' Grave

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On Oct. 17, the 208th anniversary of the assassination of Haiti's founding father Jean-Jacques Dessalines, tens of thousands of demonstrators took to Haiti's streets, once again, to demand the unconditional resignation of President Michel Joseph Martelly.

In an effort to undercut the protest, Martelly and his Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe did what they do best: they organized a one-day Carnival, with big-name bands like Djakout and T-Vice (and, of course Martelly's son, Ti Micky), on the former runway of the old military airport near Pont Rouge, where Dessalines was killed in an ambush in 1806. The government publicized the festive extravaganza, so disrespectful on such a somber occasion, via recorded robot messages over the Digicel cell phone network.

But most of the Haitian masses shunned the unfitting spectacle and instead marched to demand Martelly and Lamothe's resignations, an end to the UN military occupation (renewed three days earlier for another year) and to political persecution, arrests, and assassinations. Demonstrators also marched in Jacmel in the Southeast, in Sainte-Suzanne in the Northeast, and in Léogane, Petit Goâve, and other cities.

In Port-au-Prince, demonstrators marched along the Delmas Road to Pétionville under the slogan, "Dessalines pral kay Pétion," Dessalines is going to visit Pétion. Alexandre Pétion, who conspired in Dessalines' murder and succeeded him as Haiti's president, was a representative of Haiti's nascent comprador bourgeoisie.

As they did against demonstrators on Sep. 30, the Haitian National Police (PNH) tried to disperse the demonstrators with tear gas and skin-irritating pepper water. Police and armed thugs were also observed firing leveled weapons at demonstrators.

As some demonstrators assembled at a rally point in front of the former Church of Perpetual Help in the Bel Air neighborhood, thugs affiliated to the musical group Grand Black – such as Ti Roi, Didi Manikile, and Evens Thélemas – beat up and fired weapons at protesters, and then tore up fleeing protesters' placards.

However, the demonstrators from Bel Air joined other marchers gathering in front of the ruins of St. John Bosco church on Jean Jacques Dessalines Boulevard (Grand Rue). After the traditional ceremony around a bonfire, the march stepped off and passed through the

popular neighborhoods of La Saline, St. Martin, and Bel Air before heading towards the Delmas Road to proceed as planned to Pétionville.

But the police and thugs blocked the marchers from taking the Delmas Road so they detoured through the Solino neighborhood to the Nazon Road in hopes of finally reaching the Delmas Road that way. But on Nazon, police fired tear-gas canisters into the dense crowd to prevent them from reaching Nazon's intersection with the Delmas Road.

"Down with Martelly!" chanted the demonstrators. "Martelly said he'd kill us, the people. Quickly, quickly, let's send him packing. Onward to Pétionville!"

The Dessalines Coordination party (KOD) contingent held signs that read: "Down with Martelly and Lamothe! Both are lackeys of the colonists!"



On Oct. 17, tens of thousands marched through the Haitian capital and other cities to mark the 208th anniversary of Dessalines' death and to call for President Martelly's resignation

Along the march route, hoodlums hiding behind walls threw rocks at the demonstrators. But the determined protesters pressed on. At Delmas 30, they again tried to reach Delmas Road. But the police again met them with tear gas, pepper water, and leveled gunfire. No one was spared: political party leaders, parliamentarians, protesters, journalists, children, merchants, and public transportation passengers, all inhaled gas.

Teargas canisters were fired at a car clearly marked with the logos of Radio Vision 2000, which carried several journalists. Hundreds of people fainted from tear gas. Children had to be taken to hospital emergency rooms.

Senator Moïse Jean-Charles, the spearhead of this mobilization who rode on a horse behind a demonstrator dressed like Dessalines, was clearly targeted for attack by some PNH units. At Delmas 30, he was also overcome by the teargas, prompting some demonstrators to start screaming "Moïse is dead!" The senator was revived by people rubbing limes under his nose

and pouring soda over his head.

“This is a peaceful demonstration to commemorate Dessalines’ assassination, and the PNH is dispersing it,” Sen. Moïse said afterwards. “Today Martelly shows us once again that he does not want democracy and is politicizing the country’s police force.” (Later in the day, Police Chief Godson Orélus, dressed in a white uniform, stood grinning on the Carnival stage as President Martelly vulgarly danced with a woman.)

In the end, there were dozens of arrests and injuries. The protesters arrested were taken to the Delmas police station, and, without hearing before a justice of the peace, 19 were transported to the National Penitentiary. Among them are: St. Gourdain of Delmas 2, and Ralph Laudan Louis and Evens Clergé Jeff from the Christ-Roi district.

There are reports that the attack against Senator Moïse was aimed at assassinating him. Indeed, it is widely rumored that such a plan was hatched at a meeting involving Communications Minister Rudy Hériveaux, Sports Minister Himmler Rébu, Interior Minister Réginald Delva, Reynaud Léné of the Defense Ministry, and Police Chief Godson Orélus with some of his aides including Samuel Moreau and John Alexis, a former member of the New York diaspora organization HEAR (Haitian Enforcement Against Racism) and a unionist at 1199.

There were many political reactions after the police dispersed the demonstration. The Fanmi Lavalas political organization, in a press statement read by the coordinator of the Executive Committee, Dr. Maryse Narcisse, condemned the crackdown when the “sons of Dessalines were extending a hand to the sons of Pétion” to resolve the structural problems which have plagued Haiti since the Feb. 29, 2004 coup d’état. She also demanded the liberation of all the protestors illegally arrested and decried the police attack on professional journalists.

Former Senator Turneb Delpé of the Patriotic Movement of the Democratic Opposition (MOPOD), one of the march’s organizers, thanked the people for taking part in the anti-Martelly protest and condemned that the police who used tear gas and pepper water to prevent protesters from reaching Pétionville. He said that MOPOD along with other organizations of the democratic opposition would continue to mobilize against the Martelly regime and its repression.

The Association of Local Reporters, a journalists’ union, condemned the PNH’s firing of teargas at journalists, including those in the Vision 2000 vehicle. The union plans to file a formal complaint against the police.

Meanwhile, many severely criticized the Martelly-Lamothe regime for dancing on Dessalines’ grave by organizing a carnival with music groups. By doing this, they said, Martelly proves, once again, that he has no respect for the Haitian people’s sensibilities on this important nationalist and patriotic date.

In 2012, Martelly and Lamothe appalled people on Oct. 17 by going to the Church of St. Clair in Marchand Dessalines for a Requiem Mass dressed inappropriately in informal guayabera shirts and jeans. On that same date, the Tourism Minister Stéphanie Villedrouin shockingly said: “Happy Birthday to the Haitian people.” In 2013, Martelly marked the date by distributing money to people in Cap Haïtien.

The cruelest irony is that three days before the anniversary, on Oct. 14, the UN once again

renewed its military occupation of Haiti, which has been in place since 2004. Dessalines would be horrified. Instead of using the date to solemnly organize the people to resist the choke hold put on Haiti by foreign troops, Martelly organizes a festival to entertain the masses and put them to sleep.

That is why on Oct. 17 the demonstrators, who were so savagely repressed by the police, called for both Martelly and MINUSTAH to go, a mobilization which shows signs of sharpening in the weeks ahead.

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