

HAITI

ISSUE

With democracy reinstated in 1994, the Haitian government is now in the process of establishing institutions and mechanisms designed to guarantee a state based on laws. It must also seek to punish those guilty of human rights violations during the coup d'état from 1991 to 1994.

BACKGROUND

On September 30, 1991, a military coup d'état forced President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had been democratically elected in December 1990, into exile, where he remained until October 1994. This period was marked by massive human rights violations. Since the return to democracy, the human rights situation has improved considerably: legislative, municipal and presidential elections have been held, the Haitian army has been dismantled, and the civilian Haitian National Police has been established. Systematic repression has come to an end, and freedom of expression has been restored. Haiti receives support from the international community, through the UN peacekeeping mission (UNMIH) and the human rights assistance mission, MICIVIH, under the joint aegis of the UN and the Organization of American States (OAS).

Early in 1995, President Aristide announced the establishment of the National Commission of Truth and Justice to shed light on crimes committed during the three years of the coup d'état. The Commission submitted its report to President René Préval shortly after his inauguration in February 1996. It recommends that the main offenders be brought to justice and that their victims receive financial compensation.

In spite of significant progress made since October 1994, the current government's record on human rights has been tarnished by abuses committed by security forces. The murder of two senior officials of a small opposition party in August 1996 has been blamed on members of the Presidential Guard, and the Haitian National Police has been guilty of several summary executions and of excessive use of force during the past months. Moreover, the legal system still operates very poorly, and most prisoners must wait months before being brought to trial, even for minor offenses. Conditions of detention are often deplorable. The government is, however, aware of these problems and is seeking to correct them: it created an inspector-general of police, which since September has been taking disciplinary measures against police officers guilty of abuses; it has purged the presidential guard; and it has undertaken a reform of the legal system.

The Haitian government recently asked the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women to investigate abuse of women by the perpetrators of the coup d'état. The situation of vulnerable groups, including women and children, is particularly difficult given the level of poverty in the country. The UN Special Rapporteur on Haiti has denounced the condition of children employed as unpaid household labourers.