

## THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN HAITI

### ISSUE

A considerable improvement has been noted since President Aristide's return in October 1994. The objective now is to strengthen the institutions that will help secure the progress achieved to date.

### BACKGROUND

The period of the coup d'état, between 1991 and 1994, was one of the darkest in Haitian history in terms of human rights violations. Repression organized by the army and by paramilitary groups such as the Front révolutionnaire pour l'avancement et le progrès en Haïti (FRAPH) is estimated to have cost 4,000 lives. By rape, abusive incarceration and intimidation, these groups created a climate of terror. The situation changed completely with the restoration of President Aristide's constitutional government in October 1994, through military intervention by the international community.

Highlights of the progress achieved include the end of violence and of systematic repression of political opponents; renewed freedom of the press, association and speech; the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections; the formation of a civilian police force and the dismantling of the Haitian armed forces and paramilitary groups. The overall security of the country has greatly improved, allowing the people to resume their economic and cultural activities.

However, progress has yet to be made in certain sectors. The international community has begun an ambitious program of rehabilitating and reforming the judicial system, which includes training competent personnel, rebuilding facilities, and eventually reforming the civil and penal codes. The UNDP is working toward improving the penitentiary system, because the condition of the prisons is still unacceptable. The training of the new National Police must be extended, in order to further develop the professional skills of its members and to eradicate the abuse of power which seems to be a reflex action among some new police officers. The Government has taken steps leading to the prosecution of the perpetrators of some of the more odious crimes of the coup d'état, but this is only a start compared to the extent of the violations committed; the report of the Truth Commission responsible for investigating the abuses should be published shortly. It should renew the debate on how to proceed against the authors of these crimes.

During recent months, some spokespersons of the American right have questioned the progress achieved by the Aristide government in the area of human rights. Political columnist Robert Novak has denounced what he feels are some 30 political assassinations of opponents of the regime in 1995, while members of the House of Representatives have accused the Haitian government of obstructing the investigations into a number of murders in recent months. Despite these denunciations, there is no evidence of a campaign to eliminate