

Two Aristide supporters expected to be freed soon

The Haitian government in recent weeks has freed imprisoned supporters of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and promises to free more in the future.

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Two senior supporters of former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, whose imprisonments have been attacked by human rights groups, could soon be freed, Haitian President René Prével said Monday.

"The government prosecutor has asked that [former Prime Minister Yvon] Neptune be released, and the dossier of Só Ann should be resolved soon," Prével said in a meeting with a small group of journalists at a downtown Miami hotel.

Neptune, who served under Aristide, was jailed a year ago in connection with a 2004 massacre of Aristide opponents near the western port city of St. Marc.

He has been on and off a hunger strike to protest his detention, saying it is politically motivated.

Só Ann, whose real name is Annette Auguste, has been jailed since Mother's Day 2004. A grandmother and singer, she and several other jailed Aristide supporters are accused of participating in a violent 2003 attack on Aristide opponents. Their cases are currently before a Haitian appeals court.

Prével did not provide specifics about how the two cases would be resolved. He pointed out that in recent weeks his government has freed several Aristide supporters who had been jailed by the U.S.-backed interim government that replaced Aristide after his ouster in 2004.

Among those released was former Aristide interior minister Jocelerme Privert. Privert was jailed in April 2004, accused of being the mastermind of the St. Marc massacre. He has filed an appeal and was provisionally released 11 days ago.

One person whose fate remains undecided is the Rev. Gerard Jean-Juste, a pro-Aristide and former Miami Haitian rights activist who is facing illegal weapons and conspiracy charges.

He was freed earlier this year to seek cancer treatment in Miami.

International human rights organizations have complained that the interim government jailed scores of Aristide government officials and supporters with little cause, and considered some of them as political prisoners.

Prével arrived in South Florida Sunday and left Monday for Brussels and Paris, where he will be seeking European support for programs to professionalize Haiti's police force and other government-run departments. He is traveling with members of his government, and several Haitian businessmen who are supporting his efforts to stabilize the country.

Prével's presidency has brought a ray of hope for many Haitians who want to see progress in their impoverished homeland.

Still, he faces a litany of challenges including fixing Haiti's corrupt and antiquated justice system.

"The justice system needs to be reformed," he told the journalists Monday. ``Not just to encourage investments in the country or go behind criminals and drug dealers but to ensure the security of the population."

"What is important for us today in Haiti is for us to have peace, and it comes through dialogue," he said Monday. ``Peace brings stability."