

Aristide's premier is now a free man

Former Haitian Prime Minister Yvon Neptune was released after two years in jail.

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PORT-AU-PRINCE - Former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, looking frail in the wake of his on-and-off hunger strike, was freed Thursday after two years in prison and ferried away by an ambulance escorted by heavy security.

Neptune won his freedom one day after he spoke to the media for the first time since his arrest and vowed to fight what he called the "machine of injustice" responsible for his prolonged imprisonment without trial.

"The machine of injustice must stop," the barefoot Neptune told a small group of reporters in the barren bedroom that served as his cell. "This is not something that concerns just me. It is something that concerns all the Haitian people who don't have the means to face the machine of injustice."

Neptune's release brought a small measure of respect and goodwill toward the 2-month old government of President René Prével, who has called for national reconciliation in the aftermath of a revolt that toppled former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004. Neptune served as prime minister for Aristide.

Human rights activists hailed the new government's decision to free a man they had long considered as a political prisoner jailed by the U.S.-backed interim government that preceded Prével.

"It is a day of victory for a fight against injustice," Patrick Elie, a founding member of a Haitian citizens watchdog group that joined the international campaign for Neptune's release, said outside the prison walls. "Prime Minister Neptune has given us all a lesson in courage."

MANY DENIED JUSTICE

But scores of Aristide supporters and several thousand alleged criminals remain jailed without trials.

"I don't think that the justice system in Haiti has really redeemed itself," Elie said. "We've opened a chink in the armor of the beast. A lot remains to be done."

Neptune made no statements after his release and was taken to a hospital for a medical checkup. It was unclear what the next legal step in his case will be.

The U.N. mission in Haiti, in a written statement, said Neptune's health had "declined dramatically during his time in prison," and added that he would remain under medical care until he was well enough to go home.

2004 MASSACRE

The 59-year-old Neptune was jailed in connection with a 2004 massacre of Aristide opponents near the western port city of St. Marc. He has demanded his unconditional release and last year refused a deal that would have allowed him to leave for the neighboring Dominican Republic. An appeal seeking that the charges be dropped remains at a standstill since October.

"The appeals court has violated the rights of the political prisoner," said Neptune's attorney Mario Joseph. "As a political prisoner, he needs to fight for justice."

Elie called the case "emblematic" of Haiti's problems. His group claims that of an estimated 4,000 prisoners in jail here, only 10 percent have been tried and that many of them were arrested simply for supporting Aristide.

Neptune had been held in a two-story house next to the headquarters for the National Police that serves as a prison for high-profile inmates. The house, in the upscale neighborhood of Pacot, is surrounded by a tall steel fence topped with razor wire and guarded by police and some of the U.N. peacekeeping forces deployed here.

Neptune's room on the second floor had no furniture except for a cushion on the floor that served as a bed. The cushion was taken out of the prison Thursday, along with a suitcase carrying his belongings, including books on the Haitian constitution.

In his cell, Neptune kept two pieces of cardboard with handwritten messages in French and Creole. One welcomed "all who support truth and liberty" and the other called for doing away with injustice.

In his brief meeting with reporters Wednesday, Neptune spoke barely above a whisper as he lay on his bed, his head propped up by three thin pillows. He said that soon after Aristide fled, unnamed authorities came to him to tell him he had three options: exile, prison or death.

"Exile, they will never get me to leave; Prison, I'm already here; And death, that can come any time," Neptune said, speaking in English and Creole.

Asked if he blamed the U.S. government, which opposed Aristide, for his predicament, Neptune rolled his cloudy-looking eyes and snickered.

`THE DAGGER IS HERE'

"The dagger is here," he said, pointing to his stomach. ``You want me to give them the ability to twist it?"

"The truth is known now. It doesn't have to come from my mouth," Neptune added.

U.S. Ambassador Janet Sanderson told The Miami Herald Thursday that Washington played no role in the Neptune case. ``We had absolutely no hand in his being arrested and have consistently condemned, both publicly and privately, his prolonged detention."

Since his arrest, Neptune has issued written statements questioning the arrests of other Aristide supporters, such as singer Annette Auguste, known as Só Ann, also incarcerated without trial since 2004. He also has implied that pressure from foreign opponents of Aristide -- not the revolt by armed gangs and former soldiers in 2004 who were at the doors to Port-au-Prince when Aristide fled abroad -- led to the president's downfall.

Aristide himself has said that U.S. and French officials all but forced him to surrender power and leave the country. Washington and Paris have denied the allegation.

"I have written and will continue writing about what I know," Neptune said. ``I write about facts, not fiction. I will continue to do that as long as I live."