

Haitian gang leader defies president

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - The leader of a major gang on Monday defied Haitian President Rene Preval's orders to disarm, saying his followers would give up their weapons only if U.N. peacekeepers stop conducting raids in the slums.

Earlier this month, Preval told gang members suspected of being behind a surge of kidnappings and attacks in this impoverished Caribbean nation that they must disarm or face being killed. Gang leader Amaral Duclona's refusal comply sets up one of the biggest challenges to Preval since he became president in May.

Duclona said he and his men in the Port-au-Prince slum of Cite Soleil had planned to disarm on Monday but reconsidered because of what he called deadly raids by U.N. troops.

"As long as (U.N. troops) keep attacking, we are not going to lay down our weapons," Duclona told reporters in the seaside slum, sitting on a red motor scooter.

A military official denied that U.N. troops were launching unprovoked attacks in Cite Soleil, a densely populated shantytown lined with bullet-pocked concrete homes, burned-out cars and mounds of trash.

"If armed gangs do not attack us, we will not fire at them," said Lt. Cmdr. Neuzivaldo Dos Anjos, a spokesman for the military of Brazil, which is heading up the 8,800-strong U.N. force in Haiti.

U.N. peacekeepers were deployed to Haiti to help restore order following the 2004 revolt that toppled then-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, now exiled in South Africa. Preval is hugely popular among Haiti's poor masses and had pledged to crack down on violence and encourage foreign investment.

The United Nations mission in Haiti and the government had no immediate comment on Duclona's statements.