

Haitian gang leader to Préval: We will not lay down weapons

Citing deadly raids by U.N. peacekeepers and summary executions by state police, a major gang leader defied President Préval's call to disarm.

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PORT-AU-PRINCE - A major gang leader on Monday defied Haitian President René Préval's orders to disarm, saying his followers would give up their weapons if U.N. peacekeepers stop conducting raids in the slums.

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

GANG RECONSIDERED

Duclona said he and his men in the Port-au-Prince slum of Cité 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 Cité Soleil, a densely populated shantytown lined with bullet-pocked homes.

"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 heads up the 8,800-strong U.N. force in Haiti.

U.N. troops and Haitian police have been battling slum-based gangs, forcing many residents to flee and killing some gang fighters. On Monday, a group of Catholic nuns fled their primary school after their compound was hit by gunfire, residents said.

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. Préval is hugely popular among Haiti's poor masses and had pledged to crack down on violence and encourage foreign investment.

Duclona, considered Haiti's most wanted man, said the government should send envoys to Cité Soleil to negotiate.

PEACE GUARANTEES

"We are willing to negotiate as long as they guarantee they won't come into the community and kill people," Duclona said. "The assurances we're asking for are our lives and the lives of the people."

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

Duclona said Préval's warning earlier this month that police would eliminate gang leaders who refuse to disarm has led to more deaths.

"There are members of the police who are killing people," Duclona said. "I think it was a very bad statement."

Haitian police have committed arbitrary arrests, torture and even summary executions, U.N. human rights official Thierry Fagart said last year. National Police chief Mario Andresol has vowed to cleanse the police force of corruption.