

U.S. raids home of Haitian ex-rebel

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LES CAYES, Haiti --

A bold attempt by U.S. drug agents to arrest a former Haitian presidential candidate signals a new offensive against those suspected of using this poor Caribbean country as a narcotics gateway to the United States.

U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents descended from helicopters on this sleepy seaside town, but failed to capture former rebel and presidential candidate Guy Philippe, who apparently has gone into hiding.

"Anyone involved in drug trafficking will be hunted down and captured," Haitian Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis said Wednesday without mentioning Philippe, who in the past has denied ties to drug trafficking.

A U.S. law enforcement official said authorities were searching for the 39-year-old former soldier who led a 2004 rebellion against President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and ran for president in 2006.

"They are still beating the bushes looking for him," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not yet authorized to discuss the case.

Haiti's sparsely guarded coastline and high level of corruption make it an attractive transshipment point for South American cocaine destined for the United States. According to a recent U.S. State Department report, the number of flights carrying drugs to Hispaniola, the island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic, increased by 167 percent in 2006.

The DEA raid Monday was the first major attempt to arrest alleged traffickers since last year's election of President Rene Preval. Though unusual in its strong show of force on foreign soil, the DEA operation is legal under a 1997 bilateral agreement.

Witnesses said it was unlike anything they had ever seen in this quiet community dotted with corn and grazing cattle.

Shortly after dawn Monday, five helicopters, two planes and more than a dozen heavily armed DEA and Haitian anti-drug agents surrounded Philippe's yellow, two-story gated home in the hills above Les Cayes, on Haiti's remote southern peninsula.

Witnesses said DEA agents in olive-green uniforms and masks jumped over a barb-wired fence and smashed windows of a car parked outside the house, which is fringed by palm trees and accessible by a winding dirt road. The agents pounded on a red steel door before being let in by Philippe's wife.

"They just ran in and turned the whole house upside down but didn't find anything. They questioned all of us and left," Philippe's maid, Rosely Neresetent, told The Associated Press.

Hours later, DEA and Haitian agents raided the northwestern town of Gonaives and arrested Lavaud Francois, a businessman who is believed to have helped finance the rebellion against Aristide.

The U.S. law enforcement official said Philippe, Francois and three suspects in custody are charged in still-sealed indictments in South Florida.

Jerome M. Harris, special agent in charge of the DEA's Caribbean division, says traffickers are growing increasingly bold in Haiti, including flying in two cocaine-smuggling planes at once and off-loading them in minutes.

"It's how you would run a military operation," Harris told The AP. "They're going to go where it's soft, where there's no possibility of an endgame where their drugs would be seized or they would be arrested."

In recent years, U.S. authorities have prosecuted several former Aristide officials for drug trafficking.

Philippe's supporters say the allegations against him are politically motivated, noting he recently threatened to identify powerful Haitians who provided financial support for the 2004 rebellion.

"I'm sure this has do with politics, not justice," said Ronald Etienne, a member of Philippe's party and a deputy in Haiti's lower house of parliament. "Let's not forget Guy Philippe is a former presidential candidate."

Philippe was the police chief in Cap-Haitien, Haiti's second largest city, before fleeing to the Dominican Republic in 2000 after being accused of plotting a coup.

He returned in 2004 to help lead a three-week uprising against Aristide and later ran for president under his Front for National Reconstruction Party, which hoped to reinstate the notorious Haitian military disbanded by Aristide.

After the 2006 election, Philippe moved to Les Cayes, where locals say he runs a wholesale import business.