



**NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DE DEFENSE NETWORK
(RNDDH)**

HUNGER RIOTS:

**RNDDH's position on the latest developments that occurred
in the country**

April 2008

The Préval/Alexis government, upon its arrival in power in 2006, pledged to address two major challenges: insecurity and the high cost of living. In terms of insecurity, even if a lot remains to be done, one need not exaggerate to say that the government has produced numerous efforts toward bringing calm to areas of risk—those completely controlled by armed gangs, most notably Cité Soleil, Bel’Air, Grand-Ravine, Martissant, Gonaives, etc. Several gang leaders have been arrested. Numerous kidnapers have been judged and convicted over the course of the 2006 and 2007 criminal trials. This has fostered a climate of calm, and activities that were previously paralyzed have been able to restart. However, no effort has been made to improve the population’s socioeconomic conditions, particularly regarding food. In the space of two years, the Haitian population has witnessed a phenomenal rise in the price of basic necessities making the right to food, one aspect of the right to life, a violated right. An eruption of the situation was to be expected.

In effect, April 3 to 11, 2008, a wave of protests against the high cost of living spread throughout the country. The demonstrations began in Cayes then spread to numerous different locations without any particular group claiming responsibility. The demands, though, were similar: reduction of the price for products of basic necessity, access to the right to food, resignation of the government, departure of MINUSTAH, etc. These demonstrations gathered hundreds of thousands of people and were an occasion for the population to present its legitimate and justified demands through rhythmic chants and slogans. At the same time, as legitimate as these protest movements were, they were blemished by acts of violence, rape, theft, looting, arson, and resulted in deaths.

The governmental and law enforcement authorities, as their first step, showed complete indifference regarding their obligations to protect the lives and property of people. Public and private property were thus left to the mercy of ill-intentioned people.

The late reaction of security forces resulted in irreparable damage:

1. In **Cayes**, four people were killed and around 27 were injured, 12 by bullet and 15 by knife. A woman was raped. Those killed are as follows:
 - Lormilien Bertin, Zary Jean Baptiste, and Zammy Wilhomme killed April 3, 2008, respectively in the areas of **Boyer, Thomas** and **des Quatre Chemins**;
 - Enord Cadet, alias Ti Frè, aged 35, killed April 7, 2008 across from the **le Manguier** hotel, owned by Senator Jean Gabriel Fortuné. Some accuse the third Senator from the South in this death. He has

defended himself in the press, affirming that he responded to demonstrators' attacks, but denying having killed anyone.

2. In **Jacmel**, 10 were injured by knife, including four police officers.
3. In **Petit-Goâve**, at least eight bullet injuries were reported.
4. In **Gonaïves**, three people were injured including an agent of the Departmental Unit for Maintaining Order (UDMO). It was Agent 3, Cadet Madsen. A three month old baby inhaled teargas. He was first rushed to the hospital **Providence des Gonaïves**; but then the parents, for medical and economic reasons, had to take him to another hospital located in **Marchand Dessalines**.
5. In **Port-au-Prince**, at least 220 people were injured by bullet and knife, including at least three journalists. They include Jean Jacques Augustin from the daily periodical **Le Matin**, photographer Leblanc Mackenzie, and journalist Bellot Charles (sources: **Association of Haitian Journalists (AJH)**, **Médecins sans Frontières (MSF)**, and **RNDDH**).

The toll of the material losses is also astonishing. Essentially, for the whole country, a dozen burnt vehicles were reported. 150 others had their windshields broken.¹ Around 320 buildings were damaged along with 22 gas pumps. The **Chamber of Commerce for Haitian Industry (CCIH)** and the **National Association of Petroleum Product Distributors (ANADIPP)**, contacted by RNDDH, affirmed being in the process of collecting information on registered losses. However, RNDDH has identified in just the Port-au-Prince area at least 303 damaged buildings including 10 public buildings and the 22 aforementioned gas pumps due to the events.

The informal market was not spared by the demonstrators. Numerous retailers and restaurateurs were victim of the events. They were stripped of their merchandise as well as their money.

Situation of MINUSTAH

The UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) was also in the line of fire of certain demonstrators demanding the departure of the peacekeepers. Several bases were the object of armed attack. In Cayes, the base was looted; in Petit-Goave, one of the surveillance posts was set on fire; in Carrefour, at the Haitian Marine base, gunfire exchanges were reported. At least 15 peacekeepers were injured.

¹ Figures for damaged vehicles were reported by RNDDH monitors but are not exhaustive because, being mobile, a number of them had been removed by their owners.

MINUSTAH is also reproached for its lack of professionalism. Some agents were “trigger happy” and fired at people with rubber bullets in Cayes, Port-au-Prince, and Petit-Goave.

Reactions of the authorities

The reactions of the executive branch, including Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis, who, Saturday, April 12, resigned, or that the President of the Republic, René Garcia Préval, did not appease the anger of the demonstrators nor fulfill their expectations.

The Prime Minister, on April 4, 2008, stated on the air that the demonstrators in Cayes were manipulated by drug traffickers and smugglers who are being investigated by authorities. The same declaration was made by the third Senator from the South, Gabriel Fortuné. During his intervention, the Prime Minister took the advantage of announcing the realization of multiple programs to reduce the cost of living: 400 million gourdes that are to be immediately disbursed by authorities as follows: 65 million gourdes allocated to sanitation, 90 million gourdes to be invested in agricultural production in order to provide stores with agricultural inputs and to put tools at the disposal of farmers, 23 million gourdes allocated to a school cafeteria program, 21 million to a university restaurant program, etc.

April 9, 2008, the President of the Republic proposed, in his words, lasting solutions to fight the high cost of living through subsidizing national production such as agriculture and fishing in order to reduce the price of basic necessity products in the national market. According to him, the soaring prices of staple goods is a world phenomenon. Therefore, he did not propose to resolve the problem through subsidizing imported products with taxpayer fees because the State needs this money to carry out infrastructure work such as constructing roads, hospitals, schools, etc.

Meanwhile, April 9, 2008, a group of 16 senators launched an ultimatum of 24 hours for the Prime Minister to present the resignation of his government to the President of the Republic. Failing to do so would result in questioning by the Senate for a vote of censure. It was noted that no Senator from the LESPWA party officially adhered to these steps.

Saturday, April 12, 2008 while the Prime Minister was being questioned by the Senate, the President of the Republic met with importers with the goal of evaluation possibilities to reduce the price of imported rice. The rice importers affirmed having consented to a loss of three US dollars per bag of rice on their cost price for a period of one month. This suggests that importers agree to deliver the rice at a loss because they talked of making the change at their cost price, rather than their profit margin. This statement did not inspire trust in anyone. For his part, the President of the Republic promised to subsidize, with

the help of the international community, the importation of rice for this same period of time at a rate of five US dollars per bag.

At the conclusion of this meeting, the President of the Republic declared to the press that the state does not have the means to compensate the victims of these acts of violence.

Comments and Recommendations

The statements made by state authorities on the high cost of living bear the imprint of their economic choices, which prevents them from reacting to the accusations of non-compliance with the international economic agreements they have supported. The Minister of Commerce and Industry, Maguy Durcé, recalled that “***the government opposes all subsidies on petroleum products and basic necessity goods, but a group of projects will be implemented such as creating community restaurants to assist the needy.***”

The Haitian government does not seek to remove its economic policies that are harmful to the population. Proof is in the application of the National Strategic Document for Growth and Poverty Reduction (DSNCRP) or the recent signing of the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). The Haitian government’s commitment to this economic direction shows that it is little concerned with the economic, social, and cultural rights of its citizens. This indifference of the state regarding these rights represents a violation of one of its obligations, which is to progressively achieve collective rights.

It is noteworthy, first, that though western countries prohibit countries with fragile and vulnerable economies from protecting their agriculture through subsidies, they do not follow these same rules at home, even though such practices are described as “***barriers to free trade***” by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and trade cooperation with the major powers. The latter impose the rules of the game for economic relations: neoliberalism, non-interventionism by the state, and other principles that do not take into account the social, economic, and cultural rights of countries such as Haiti. Second, the response of the government to this crisis is purely cosmetic, the proposed projects to not take into account the root of the problem.

The power demonstrates complete disregard in responding to the demands of the population, thus feeding the feeling of hopelessness that has resulted in the series of demonstrations. At the same time, it is deplorable that the attacks were perpetrated against private and public goods, that the press was attacked, that journalists were victim while carrying out their roles, that the security authorities—victim in certain areas—also demonstrated a blatant lack of professionalism in the protection of the lives and goods of citizens. Essentially, security authorities were responsible for acting poorly against the civil

population, for causing injuries and deaths that could have been avoided. It is also regrettable that the government, having been in place for almost two years, is only today thinking of investing in national production to fight against the high cost of living. Worse yet, such a program only exists through a simple declaration of intention by the chief of state. No real plan for economic recovery has been announced.

RNDDH believes that today, more than ever, the power needs to reconsider its economic orientation, to cease having its conduct dictated by the *International Monetary Fund* and the *World Bank*, and to apply a social economic policy that takes into account the demands and interests of the population: taking effective measures to lower the cost of living, creation of a work-intensive workforce, strengthening and support of national production, cessation of bureaucratic waste in the state administration, and fighting against corruption and impunity in the state are all solutions that can prevent the recurrence of such movements.

RNDDH sends its condolences to all of the victims and on their behalf calls for **Justice** and **Reparation**. For this, the organization urges the Haitian state to conduct a thorough investigation on the latest developments in the country, bringing to trial all those responsible for acts of looting, robbery, rape, murder, as well as all officers guilty of excessive use of force in order for them to answer for their actions, regardless of contacts or their level of responsibility in society.