

Renewed Threats Against Human Rights Activist in Haiti

Letter written by the Lawyers Committee jointly with the National Coalition for Haitian Rights, the International Human Rights Law Group, Human Rights Watch, the Center for International Policy and the Washington Office on Latin America.

President Jean-Bertrand Aristide
Palais National
Champs de Mars
Port-au-Prince, Haiti

October 30, 2001

Dear President Aristide:

We are writing to express our deep concern for the safety and welfare of Haiti's most prominent human rights defenders.

Earlier today, the office of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR) in Haiti sent a communiqué to its international supporters and allies to inform them of the gravity of the recent wave of death threats that they, and colleagues at the Platform for Haitian Human Rights Organizations (POHDH), have been receiving. These threats began earlier this month, following the publication of an open letter from NCHR to the leadership of the Haitian National Police (PNH). The NCHR letter deplored the increasing politicization evident among the ranks of the police and the resulting weakening of the already fragile public security situation.

Of particular concern is the fact that these threats began shortly after your meeting with the leadership of the National Police and your call for action to be taken against the officers named in NCHR's courageous letter.

Trusted sources close to the police and the Fanmi Lavalas Party report to Pierre Espérance, the director of NCHR in Haiti, that he, as well as members of his staff and that of the POHDH, are mentioned by name on a list currently in circulation in Haiti, marked for assassination.

There have been other recent threats as well. In June of this year, Espérance publicly condemned the government's stated "zero tolerance" policy toward crime. In response, René Civil of the so-called popular organization Jan l'Pase l'Pase (JPP) and Paul Raymond of Ti Komite Legliz (TKL) publicly called on the government to show zero tolerance toward NCHR and other human rights organizations. During the month of August, Espérance also received several menacing calls on his cellular phone. The different callers warned that if NCHR continued to press for justice in the Jean Dominique case, he would be eliminated.

Our concern is heightened by the fact that on one occasion, threats against Mr. Espérance were followed by an assassination attempt from which he was fortunate to escape with his life. On March 8, 1999, Espérance was attacked in front of the NCHR office after NCHR and the POHDH had received similar threats. His truck was riddled with bullets from automatic machine gun fire, and he was shot in the shoulder and knee. We are gravely concerned that unless the current threats are properly addressed, they too may be translated into action. We are also greatly concerned that, to date, there has been no progress in the investigation of that assassination attempt.

The UN's Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1998, provides that everyone has the right to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Under the Declaration, all States, including Haiti, are committed to adopting all necessary legislative, administrative, and other measures to ensure that the rights of human rights defenders such as Mr. Espérance and his colleagues are effectively guaranteed.

We call on you as President to ensure that the threats received by the staff of NCHR Haiti and its partners in the Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organizations are promptly investigated and the perpetrators brought swiftly to justice.

Secondly, it is imperative that security be provided to NCHR and POHDH staff and work places, specifically Pierre Espérance, Vilès Alizar, Jean Simon Saint Hubert, and Serge Bordenave. Appropriate security arrangements should be worked out in consultation with these groups and individuals.

Finally, we request that the Ministry of Justice re-open its investigation into the March 1999 assassination attempt against Pierre Espérance.

Given the urgency of the situation, swift and effective measures are required. Not only are such actions crucial to ensure the protection of the staff of NCHR and POHDH, they will also send a strong message in support of the right of all Haitians to freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to criticize government policy.

Sincerely,

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