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THE LIVING DEAD

by Bonny Butler

Haiti's lush foliage belies its poverty and the unspeakable violence that has gripped this island nation since October 1993, when its army undermined a UN sponsored agreement to return exiled President Jean Bertrand Aristide. Haitians describe the current situation as worse than the terror of the François "Papa Doc" Duvalier regime, especially in regard to women. Until recently, crimes against women and children were relatively rare. However, human rights workers are now reporting the systematic rape of women and the kidnapping of children as a means of political retaliation.

According to LaShawn Jefferson of the Washington-based Women's Rights Project, "The de facto government is not only unable to protect women against political and nonpolitical

violations; it actually promotes and creates a perfect environment for it to happen."¹ Women have reported being raped for carrying a membership card in Aristide's party or owning a voter registration card for the year Aristide was elected.² Others fall prey to the random but pervasive acts of violence. Father Antoine Adrien, a prominent Aristide supporter, describes current conditions as an effort to intimidate the entire population: "To say this situation is awful, terrible, is to understate reality. Haiti has reached its lowest point."³

Analysts attribute this brutality to the military and to a paramilitary group known as FRAPH, the Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti. While extrajudicial killings have often marked Haiti's history, the mutilation of corpses, kidnapping of children, and rape of women were virtually unknown in the past. Now, UN observers receive daily reports of rape. As the UN spokesman in Haiti, Eric Falt described rape as "one more weapon in the arsenal of political repression. It is one of the most severe human rights abuses, but it is even more odious when it is used as an instrument of political repression."⁴

With the May 1994 installation of the militarily supported provisional president, Emil Jonassaint, no one expects any immediate improvement in women's rights. Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch will soon release a report on attacks against women in Haiti. What could make a difference for Haitian women is the vigilance of the human rights community and its willingness to recognize that rape, when used as a political weapon, constitutes a serious violation of human rights. Voices like those of an activist with Haitian Women Solidarity need to continue telling the story: "These days everyone is asking whether this is another way for them to kill people. We are alive, but in this situation we are like the living dead."⁵ May their words create the political desire and will to act, to make a difference, to change death into life for all Haitians.

*****Editorial Note:** On October 15, 1994, previously ousted President Jean Bertrand Aristide returned to Haiti and resumed power. In the midst of this new political climate, the future of human rights violations under Aristide is yet to be determined.

¹ Kathie Klarreich, *Haiti - the pressure mounts*, THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE, May 7, 1994, at A-22.

² Harold Maass, *Violence against Women Increasing in Haiti*, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, Apr.24,1994, at A-21.

³ Kenneth Freed, *Aristide's Stronghold Faces Terror from Opposition*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, Apr. 11, 1994, at A-5.

⁴ Maass, *supra* note 2.

⁵ *Id.*