

The Washington Post

In a turnabout, police are the good guys in post-quake Haiti

By William Booth
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PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI -- In the hours and days after the city crumbled and the enfeebled government of Haiti disappeared from public view, a remarkable thing happened here: The police showed up for work.

Since the earthquake struck, the once notoriously corrupt Haitian National Police have been doing their jobs and are keeping something approaching law and order in a capital of chaos.

A force previously dominated by thugs has transformed itself, according to international advisers, U.N. police officers and Haitians. In Port-au-Prince today, there is something almost heroic about an officer trying to direct traffic on Grand Rue Dessalines.

"I have seen the people wave at us and say, 'Good job!' which gives the men a strong feeling in their hearts," said Lavaud Belimaire, a police inspector who heads an 80-officer corps in the commercial heart of the city, where looters have methodically stripped warehouses of their goods.

Their counterparts among the U.N. peacekeepers and U.N. police drive

around in armored personnel carriers. They are banking hazardous-duty pay, and they have access to psychological counseling and a PX store stockpiled with baguettes and cognac. But the Haitian police have not been paid yet, which is making U.S. and U.N. officials nervous.

Until the broken Haitian government can figure out how to distribute paychecks, the national police have been working for food. That's one meal a day, given to them by the foreigners, that "we have to beg for," said the chief of police. There is ominous grumbling in the ranks about a lack of respect.

Foreign diplomats with long histories in Haiti confess near-amazement that the police did not fold. A decade ago, during cycles of hurricanes and coups, it would

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have been the police careening through the city in trucks stuffed with stolen electronics.

"In the old days, you ran away from the Haitian police, you didn't run toward them. They were the bad guys," said Richard Warren, the U.N. deputy police commissioner in charge of helping the Haitian National Police. "That has changed, and you can see the change with your own eyes."

Haitian police officers are directing traffic at crazy intersections -- and most vehicles actually stop. When drivers ignore them, the police seize their licenses on the spot. The police escort water trucks into desperately thirsty neighborhoods and keep order, which the U.N. forces have not managed to do with food deliveries.

The Haitian police guarded banks, gas stations and cash delivery outlets such as Western Union when they reopened this week.

"When the people see the police now, it makes them feel better," said Erik Bayard, an attendant at what is now one of the city's most functional gas stations. "They help keep things calm, and they keep the rowdy ones away."

A few nights ago at the Champs du Mars park in the city center, where a tent city

of tens of thousands now stands, the police quickly rushed an eerily dazed woman into a van when a crowd began screaming, "Loup-garou!" -- werewolf! -- at her. A bystander said the people wanted to lynch her because they thought she was possessed by demons.

According to the Haitian National Police, there were about 2,500 officers in Port-au-Prince before the earthquake. At least 66 died and 50 were seriously injured in the quake, according to Haitian authorities. The police chief said 491 officers are still unaccounted for -- they could be AWOL or dead; he is not sure.

"The foreigners need to understand the earthquake did the same thing to the police it did to the population," said Antoine Franck, an officer on duty at the Champ du Mars park. "My house fell down. I lost everything. Everyone's house fell down. My dear brother's house fell

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down, and he is dead under there. Every policeman has dead family."

Neither Haiti's president nor prime minister has yet addressed the public. For all the talk by the U.S. Embassy and U.N. officials about operating under the command of Haitian authorities, the government is barely functioning.

"At this point, the Haitian National Police are the only real government institution that the people on the street can see," said Jean-Pierre Esnault, a U.N. official who is working on issues of law and order.

The chief of police, Mario Andresol, is operating out of the former SWAT compound near the international airport. His office is a conference table under a tree where goats wander. Andresol considers himself a swashbuckling man of the people and he understands the value of good PR. He compared himself to an actor in an action movie.

"I like to ride my motorcycle and talk to the people, to show them I was one of you and I am still one of you," he said. "In the old days, the chief is the one who sits in the big chair and acts like the big man with the dark sunglasses. I want the people to see it is not like that anymore. . . I want the kids to say they want to be a cop when they grow up."

Just a few years ago, Andresol said, "Twenty-five percent of the police were corrupt, and they were responsible for 65 percent of the crime in the country. Now we're making some progress."

When the earth began to shake, Andresol was at his headquarters. He managed to throw himself out of the building, which collapsed. "I am lucky to be sitting here talking to you," he said. Then, as if the thought just occurred to him, he said, "Look at me! I am alive."

Andresol said the police and international forces have the situation under control -- for now.

"We have all the old problems -- the bad guys, the kidnappers, murderers, drug dealers, the gangs -- but we now also have to provide security for a whole city living on the street," he said. "You have the looters all around. People getting

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hungry day by day. The food is not being distributed in any big way, and so we will have problems with crowds soon."

International advisers to the police say Andresol and his top leadership are performing well enough under the circumstances. A few days ago, as a show of support, a U.N. official brought a box of 9mm cartridges to Rosemond Aristide, the chief of police in the Cite Soleil slum, who had just five rounds in his sidearm.

The diplomats recall that the chief of the national police, Maj. Michel Francois, orchestrated the overthrow of President Jean-Bertrande Aristide in 1991, motivated in part by his desire to protect cocaine-smuggling interests.

What scares the Haitian police the most is not visible to most outsiders. Jails and prisons fell down in the quake, and 4,000 Haitian inmates escaped. Many were the leaders of Cite Soleil gangs, which act as armies of intimidation; they work for the business elite and politicians, carrying out kidnappings, assassinations, extortion and political intimidation -- often for hire. They were deeply involved in drug trafficking.

Andresol vowed, "I will find these guys and put them back in prison."

But U.N. officials say the United States denied a request to send down a prison

ship. There is no place to house inmates in the city.

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