

Haiti braces as U.N. deadline nears

WASHINGTON (CNS) — U.S. bishops and the Vatican reiterated support for restoring democracy in Haiti as the U.N. deadline for the return of the country's deposed president neared.

In Haiti, the nation's bishops urged citizens to avoid succumbing to fear as violence increased.

CRS officials in the capital of Port-au-Prince, meanwhile, said they were closing their office early to get off the streets to avoid possible run-ins with roving gunmen.

Some U.S. and Canadian women religious have vowed to remain in the Caribbean nation with the poor, despite the troubles.

Diplomats said they hoped to get a U.N.-brokered plan back on track for returning Haiti's ousted president, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, to power Oct. 30. Father Aristide was elected in the country's first democratic elections and served seven months — February to September 1991 — before being deposed in a military coup.

Following the collapse of a peace plan to return the president, the U.N. Security Council imposed economic sanctions on Haiti.

As a result of the economic quarantine, gasoline supplies evaporated, electrical blackouts became more frequent and food prices soared and public transportation was curtailed. The impoverished nation's telephone service was said to be near collapse because of the lack of fuel.

In Washington, Archbishop John R. Roach, head of the U.S. bishops'

Committee on International Policy, reiterated support for Father Aristide's government, but cautioned outsiders against seeking to impose an outcome to the crisis.

Without mentioning Father Aristide, Archbishop Roach emphasized that the Haitian people, who "had previously been able only to dream of a democratic order, have expressed themselves through the ballot; their will must be respected."

He noted that the U.S. bishops' previous declarations against violence and human rights abuses in Haiti "committed both by the supporters and the opponents of the elected president, before, during, and after his time in office."

Archbishop Roach said that "crimes committed against representatives of the church in early 1991" should not be forgotten. He was referring to attacks by Father Aristide's supporters, who destroyed church buildings, stripped the papal nuncio to his underwear and sent Haiti's top churchmen scurrying into hiding.

But, he continued, "neither can we pass over in silence the hundreds of violent deaths caused over the last two years by allies of the de facto government. The murders in recent days of prominent aides of the exiled president seem especially heinous."

The statement also reiterated insistence on "a more compassionate response by our government to the pleas of the Haitian boat people for refuge, a safe haven from the danger and persecution they fear in Haiti."

Archbishop William H. Keeler of Baltimore, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, said Oct. 22 that Haiti was "in our minds and our prayers."

"We're following it very closely and

praying that there will be a resolution of the situation without bloodshed," said the archbishop, who was in Rome for meetings with the pope and other Vatican officials.

He said the church in the United States has a deep interest in Haiti for several reasons: It is a U.S. neighbor; there are many Haitians in the United States, and the situation of Haitian refugees has prompted several statements by U.S. bishops.

In addition, he said, some local churches have "partnerships" with Haitian dioceses, and so are acutely aware of how much the people are suffering there.

At the Vatican Oct. 20, Pope John Paul II met with the papal nuncio in Haiti, Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, to discuss the growing crisis.

The Vatican released no details of the meeting, but said it had not received any official request for mediation. The head of Haitian armed forces, Gen. Raoul Cedras, reportedly had suggested in an interview that the pope might personally intercede to help find a solution to the impasse.

As the pope discussed the situation in Haiti, his aides said the Vatican supports a restoration of democracy and is ready to deal with Father Aristide as the country's legitimate leader if he returns to power.

At the same time, the Vatican maintains some reservations about Father Aristide, who was expelled from the Salesian religious order in 1988 for his political activities, the officials said. Father Aristide has not practiced his priestly ministry since then.

The Vatican officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the Vatican was open and realistic about Father Aristide regaining his political role. But his past problems with



AP/Wide World Photos
Workers construct a boat in Leogane, Haiti, Oct. 21. U.S. officials are concerned that refugees may flood this country if exiled Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide doesn't return to power by Oct. 30.

church authorities have left some misgivings, they said.

One official said the Vatican cannot forget that "people around" Father Aristide were responsible for the attack on church personnel and property in 1991, referred to in Archbishop Roach's statement. Father Aristide later expressed "great sadness" over the incidents.

When the Vatican replaced its papal nuncio in 1992, four months after Father Aristide's ouster, there was another disagreement with the priest. The Vatican said it was merely replacing a nuncio who had been transferred to Africa. But Father Aristide interpreted the move as recognition of the army-backed government and condemned the Vatican in a speech at the United Nations.

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