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## MIGHT OF MILITIAS KEY TO ARISTIDE'S GRIP ON POWER

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, **Haiti** - Their leaders have ominous names like "One Shot to the Head" and "Caesarean Section." They have up to 30 men in each group, many of them teens, patrolling neighborhoods across the city with M-4 carbines and Beretta 9mm handguns with which they enforce their own justice.

They allegedly traffic drugs, extort money from locals, and steal cars. Still, they insist they aren't gangs; they call themselves "popular organizations" or OPs, and they form the core of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's governing party, Lavalas.

The OPs number in the thousands, although exactly how many is difficult to determine. Without them, Aristide may not be able to maintain power. With them, this government may be the biggest mafia in the Caribbean.

"I am the police," said James Petit-Frere, 22, a tall, thin leader of an area called Soleil 19. Soleil 19 is part of Cite Soleil, a vast slum of 200,000 people near the coast. "Everybody here, if I say do something, they do it because I'm the president of this neighborhood," he said.

Two weeks ago, an OP in the port city of Gonaives, 70 miles north of Port-au-Prince, revolted against the government, storming the police station and forcing government officers to flee. Their action sparked an uprising that has spread to several cities in the north. Now many are wondering if other OPs, especially those in government strongholds like Cite Soleil, will follow.

Petit-Frere's nickname is "Iron Pants." As he talks, he ejects a cartridge from his Glock 9mm pistol and surveys his territory. One-story houses made of haphazardly assembled concrete blocks and metal roofs line dirt roads. There is no central plumbing, and only recently did the government install the electricity that lights homes a few hours a day.

Still, the affection for Aristide is evident. Young women in Aristide T-shirts delicately balance buckets of laundry and water on their heads. Faded posters of the president line the walls.

Aristide paved a road and built a park in Petit-Frere's neighborhood. The president also increased the potable water supply.

"I love Aristide because I see [that] Aristide loves the people," Petit-Frere said. "Life is OK for people who are not working. He builds housing for the people."

Aristide has also handed over command of the area. Petit-Frere metes out justice as he sees fit. He said his men have killed five people for crimes ranging from theft to rape since he took over Soleil 19 two years ago.

Petit-Frere has been working for Aristide and Lavalas since he was a child, handing out pamphlets and hawking party T-shirts. With such help, Aristide rolled into power in 1990.

The Haitian military, however, ousted Aristide seven months later. During the next three years, Lavalas supporters in Cite Soleil and other poor neighborhoods across **Haiti** fended off attacks by the military and its death squads.

Petit-Frere said that during the military dictatorship his group obtained handguns and shotguns and created an ad-hoc security system. Strategically placed scouts would warn of approaching death squads by blowing conch shells; armed men would position themselves for the assault.

The defense system did not always work. Hundreds were killed, including several people who labored with Petit-Frere in the Lavalas campaign.

The US sent 23,000 troops to restore Aristide to the presidency in 1994. Once back in power, Aristide disbanded the military and created a small police force of about 5,000 officers in its place. Aristide was reelected in 2000, but more coup attempts followed.

In response to this continued threat, Lavalas solidified the "popular organizations." According to many OP defectors, the party armed them with automatic weapons and pistols and set them loose on the opposition political parties. The OPs crash marches with sticks, rocks, and guns; set up barricades of burning tires; and lash out with lurid threats.

"If you don't want Aristide for five years" - the term of his presidency - "we will gut you," the OP known as Caesarean Section has told opponents.

When a political opponent rises in popularity, Lavalas allegedly pays OP leaders to assassinate him. Their actions earned them the nickname "chimere," which means fire-breathing dragon.

"Everyone with guns here is for hire," said Pierre Esperance, the director of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights, a human rights group with offices in Port-au-Prince and New York. "Guns are not here to defend ideology. Guns are here to defend one person."

For their support, Esperance said, the OPs get carte blanche in their neighborhoods to traffic drugs, steal cars, and extort money from their neighbors. He said that there is evidence that the OPs work with police to kidnap wealthy Haitians for ransom.

The government maintains it does not use civilians for security operations. For his part, Aristide has insisted there is no tie between his political party and the militias. "From my knowledge, I never heard that Lavalas gave weapons" to the OPs, he told reporters last week. "I heard that some people got weapons. Where did they get weapons? We have drug dealers in **Haiti**."

But contact between Aristide and the OPs is well known. OP leaders regularly visit the national palace. Petit-Frere said he has a job protecting the Lavalas mayor of his borough, and other OP leaders said they have similar jobs with the government.

Petit-Frere also said he and others work as part of Aristide's security detail. Their many trips together include one in January to Gonaives to celebrate the country's bicentennial.

Petit-Frere said that since the revolt began in Gonaives, the leader of the OP there has called him and tried to persuade him to change sides. He said opposition politicians in Port-au-Prince have also contacted him.

Some OP leaders in Port-au-Prince have already defected. One leader in Cite Soleil turned against Aristide after an attempt on his life that left five people dead. The leader blames Aristide and remains in hiding in the slums.

Petit-Frere said that other leaders may follow, including himself. "If you work and you can't get no pay, no money," he explained. "Like I see I can't find anybody to help me buy a car and I find another boss who helps me get the car, do you think I will still stay with Lavalas? No way."

The government is reportedly scrambling to keep control of the OPs. In the last week, rights leader Esperance said, five wealthy Haitians have been kidnapped.

**LOAD-DATE:** February 19, 2004

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**GRAPHIC:** PHOTO, 1. James Petit-Frere, 22, leads a Haitian slum called Soleil 19. "Everybody here, if I say do something, they do it because I'm the president of this neighborhood," he said. / GLOBE PHOTO / CARLOS VILLALON 2. Members of a Haitian gang spent time at a safe house in Port-au-Prince that provides food and a place to sleep. They are the "chimere" - violent fighters paid to do the government's work. / GLOBE PHOTO / CARLOS VILLALON

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