

# US reported to intercept Aristide calls

## Exiled Haitian leader is said to cite American invasion vow

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WASHINGTON - As exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti waits impatiently in Washington to be restored to power, the National Security Agency has been listening in on his international phone calls, US intelligence sources said.

NSA intercepts have picked up Aristide on several recent occasions, the sources said.

After a close associate, Rev. Jean-Marie Vincent, was assassinated in Port-au-Prince on Aug. 28, Aristide was heard telling a colleague that a US official had promised him that the Haitian military commanders who seized power in 1991 would soon be forced out of office.

Aristide also has reportedly been heard expressing irritation with the pace of US efforts to oust the junta.

In public, Aristide has never endorsed US military intervention in Haiti. But even his most nationalist-minded supporters in Haiti are now expressing fervent hopes for a quick invasion.

The conversations that were monitored appear to have been international calls, the sources said, made by Aristide from the United States to Haiti. The NSA is forbidden to intercept purely domestic calls.

One senior official, asked to comment on the intercepts, suggested that they were all but accidental: the NSA is clearly "vacuuming" Haiti's phone communications for any useful pieces of intelligence that it can find, the official said, and had picked up Aristide's conversations in its sweep.

Extracts from the Aristide conversations are believed to have been distributed to senior members of the Clinton administration.

Intelligence specialists were not startled by the news that the NSA was listening to an ally's phone calls.

"It hardly surprises me that they are doing that," said Jeffrey Richelson, a consultant on intelligence affairs and author of "The US Intelligence Community." Richelson recalled a long record of US spying on allies, from the bugging of South Vietnamese leader Nguyen Van Thien's television set to listening in on Israeli communications today.

### Shaky relationship

But the Aristide intercepts once again underline the shaky relationship that has prevailed between Aristide and successive US administrations that have given him shelter since he was overthrown in October 1991.

After months of apparent hesitation, the Clinton

administration is now poised to expel the Haitian military junta, by force if necessary. Planning for an invasion is complete, military officials said, and intervention seems imminent.

For much of the past year, however, as the administration edged slowly and at times clumsily toward intervention, major government institutions have signaled their lack of support for Aristide. In an almost regular flow of leaks, for example, the Pentagon made it clear that it did not relish military intervention.

### Sanity questioned

The Defense Department was not alone. The CIA questioned Aristide's sanity in a now-discredited report that was leaked to conservative members of Congress. And when William Gray, the White House's special envoy on Haiti, backed a plan to broadcast Aristide's messages to Haiti using US military aircraft, the US Information Agency opposed the idea.

These discordant signals, accompanied at times by the near open hostility of some officials, may have reinforced the belief of Haiti's current rulers, Lt. Gen. Raoul Cedras and his colleagues, that Washington was too divided and too hesitant to intervene.

State and Defense department officials said the junta's leaders will be proven wrong very soon. But some of the officials concede that the Aristide-US relationship is unusual and fragile.

Aristide - a stum priest, grass-roots activist, exponent of Liberation Theology - "represents everything that that CIA, DOD and FBI think they have been trying to protect this country against for the past 50 years," a US official with extensive experience of Haiti said this week.

The United States has never intervened in Haiti on the side of a representative of the masses, the official said. US presidents traditionally have favored the ruling elite.

When Aristide was an activist priest in the slums of Port-au-Prince, US diplomats described him as a dangerous radical. His newfound alliance with Washington still leaves Aristide nervous and suspicious of US intentions, the official contended.

Aristide has proven his tough-mindedness in discussions with the administration over planning for the days following intervention, officials said. He has said, for instance, that he does not plan to return to Haiti for seven to 10 days after any intervention. His supporters in the Clinton administration said this makes good security sense, as he will be a marked man.

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Critics in the government fear, however, that the will leave US troops to run the country in the interim, something that the Pentagon is keen to avoid.

Aristide has also stressed that he wants to decide personally who should be allowed to remain in the higher reaches of the Haitian police force.

Some officials view this as prudence; others regard it as unnecessary and time-consuming micromanagement of a country that needs to be rebuilt from the ground up.

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