

## HAITI

### Michèle Montas, An admirable battle against impunity

On 25 December 2002, two armed men arrived at the home of Michèle Montas and opened fire, fatally wounding one of her bodyguards Maxime Séide.



For more than two years, Michèle Montas's stubborn fight for justice for her husband has exposed her to numerous threats. Jean Dominique, head of *Radio Haiti Inter*, one of Haiti's best-known journalists, was gunned down along with a watchman at the station, on 3 April 2000. For her, "Jean was killed because they couldn't control him". He had an independent outlook that had already forced the journalist couple to go into exile during the Duvalier era in 1980 and again in 1991 after the military coup.

Following the Christmas 2002 attempt on her life, Montas decided once again to leave the country. Last February, after new threats against the radio station's editorial team, she announced, heartbroken, that the radio station was going off the air. "Three of our people have already been killed and we don't want to lose any more," she said.

At the same time, she condemned "people who think they are above the law," referring to the many obstacles thrown up to hamper the investigation. These have included: intimidation of examining magistrates; the suspicious deaths of two suspected killers; arrest warrants not acted on by police; refusal of the Senate to lift the immunity of one of its members and obstruction by President Aristide himself.

The third examining magistrate, on 21 March 2003, charged six men suspected of carrying out the murder, but failed to name anyone who ordered the killing. From her exile in the United States, Montas launched an appeal. On 4 August, the court ordered the case reopened ... and the release of three of the six already charged.

Convinced that the courts in her country were too much in the grip of the government to act effectively, Montas prepared to bring the case before inter-American judicial bodies. The journalist had no fears about embarking on a new battle.

## Impunity as a means of cowing the press

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The authorities have found that allowing killers of journalist to act with complete impunity has become the best way of intimidating the press.



After Jean Dominique, it was Brignol Lindor (photo) who, in December 2001, paid with his life for his outspokenness. He was killed after inviting opposition figures onto his radio programme. Two years later, despite having confessed, his killers remain unpunished. They are members of the People's Organisation (OP) or *Domi nan bwa*, close to Fanmi Lavalas (Lavalas Family - FL, the president's party). While the investigation resulted in charges against ten of them, not one of them has been locked up for the crime..

And no charge has been laid against Dumay Bony, a Lavalas deputy who had called for the journalist to be murdered. In March 2003, the courts refused the family's request to be a civil party to the case.

The OP are in fact a militia acting under government orders to sow terror in the ranks of the opposition and among journalists. In 2003, they systematically attacked opposition demonstrators without sparing the press: nearly 20 journalists were attacked during demonstrations.

For many people the OP are a throwback to the notorious "tontons macoutes" of the Duvalier era (1959-1986). The machine-gunning of the studios of *Caraïbes FM* in Port-au-Prince at the end of October 2003 reminded people of practices of the "attachés" of the military regime of General Cédras (1991-1994). Both were dictators against whom in his time Jean-Bertrand Aristide fought against, but whose methods have resurfaced under his regime.

"The state of impunity is more often replacing the state of law," said Louis Joinet, the UN's independent human rights expert for Haiti at the beginning of November 2003. "The situation is serious, very serious," he said, adding that it was in danger of worsening still further. He referred to the kidnapping by unknown attackers of Peterson Milord, of the stations *Vision 2000* and *Radio Passion*, and the maltreatment he suffered at the hands of his captors.

The government argues that the press has only itself to blame for attacks on it. Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, insinuated on 21 October that the media did not get their facts right, a veiled hint to OP to target them. Members of the security forces are themselves sometimes implicated: four journalists were badly beaten by police officers on 20 March under the nose of a French diplomat.

Things are so bad, that since 2000 some 30 journalists have gone into exile, mostly to France, the United States and Canada. The situation could deteriorate even further as some of the OP are now turning against Aristide as their leaders, perhaps because they have become an embarrassment to the president, have been gunned down.

The country is sinking into chaos. Jean-Bertrand Aristide now seems to have only one aim, to be president at the bi-centenary of Haitian independence on 1st January 2004. Journalists who realise this and dare to condemn it will need to watch out...

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