

Departing UN official blasts Haiti's rights record

By TRENTON DANIEL
Associated Press

The former United Nations human rights monitor in Haiti is taking a swipe at the Caribbean nation's legal system as he leaves his post.

In an open letter that was sent to the Haitian press and obtained by The Associated Press on Thursday, Michel Forst criticized the government for the continuation of arbitrary and illegal arrests, its interference in the justice system and for threatening journalists.

"When I leave my office, I do not want to hide my concerns and disappointment in the developments in the field of rule of law and human rights," Forst wrote.

There was no immediate response from the government of President Michel Martelly.

In his list of concerns, Forst describes how arbitrary and illegal arrests continue throughout the country. They appear in weekly reports submitted to the U.N.'s human rights section.

The letter also expresses concerns over political intervention in the legal system, citing the case of Calixte Valentin, a presidential adviser who was locked up on charges of killing a young farmer. Valentin was let go six months later "by a judge specially appointed for this purpose by the current Minister of Justice," Forst wrote.

And he points to threats that were made by the Minister of Communication against journalists along with reports that journalists would not be allowed to participate in official events because their publications are suspected of supporting the opposition.

Based in Geneva, Forst stepped down last week as the U.N.'s independent expert on the situation of human rights in Haiti, a post that he had held since June 2008.

Since Forst announced his resignation, reports appeared on the Internet that he left because of a disagreement with Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The U.N. in February dismissed a complaint seeking compensation on behalf of people who've contracted cholera, a disease whose introduction to Haiti has been attributed to U.N. troops in scientific studies.

Forst said his resignation had "nothing to do with" the U.N.'s decision or because of problems with Haitian authorities as had also been reported. He left, he said, because he was "called to other duties."

A successor will be named in June and is due to visit Haiti before year's end.

The letter did not focus exclusively on shortcomings.

He welcomed an earlier effort to overhaul Haiti's penal code and the appointment of a minister for human rights and the fight against extreme poverty. He also applauded the February testimony of Jean-Claude Duvalier, a former dictator who answered questions on alleged human rights abuses committed under his 15-year rule.

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