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Rebels Look for Looters, Wait to Invade Capital

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CAP HAITIEN, Haiti—The rebels patrol in pickup trucks, two in the front, four or five piled in the back. They carry pistols and M-16 and Israeli Galil assault rifles and World War II-era shotguns.

They wear a collage of camouflage army fatigues, police riot gear and motorcycle helmets. A couple, inexplicably, even sport gas masks and yellow rain coats.

And most of the people in this Caribbean port pretty much ignore them when they pass.

In Haiti's second-largest city, the rebels from the Haitian Liberation Front who seized this port of 500,000 have become simply its new rulers - no different from the policemen who fled when they turned up Sunday.

They claim to be preparing for an attack on Port-au-Prince, to topple President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Every day they say: soon, in a couple of days, when the capital is ripe for the taking.

But meanwhile they are keeping the city safe from looters. They say they have rounded up a few of the feared chimères, gunmen who back Aristide. And they admit some of those have been killed but won't say more.

HUNT FOR 'CHIMERES'

They insist they are only trying to take Haiti away from Aristide and his Lavalas Family party and return it to Haitians. "There are people who are Lavalas because they needed a job or because Aristide was a priest," said Louis Jodel Chamblain, the second in

command of the rebel forces. "They are free to walk the streets. It is only the chimères we want. They terrorized the people."

Chamblain, once a feared leader of FRAPH, a brutal paramilitary group that supported the 1991-1994 military dictatorship, drove around Cap Haitien with an M-16 propped in the open window beside him, pointing out to a reporter the businesses that were open, the city returning to normal.

He said schools would reopen next week, and even found a small school that was already open.

Some people on the streets waved to him, if he called out to them. Most continued about their business.

'THEY DIDN'T REGISTER'

At the 50-room Hotel Mont Joli, the commanders gathered in clusters and mostly wouldn't say what they talked about.

The hotel, opened in 1954, has hosted movie stars such as Ava Gardner and Marlon Brando, according to owner Walter Bussenius. Much has changed in 50 years, but nothing compares to the past week, when the rebels adopted it as their headquarters.

Two dozen or so men have taken up residence, sitting by his crystal clear pool with AK-47s on their laps or gathering in its lobby to launch their patrols.

"They didn't register, they just took over the hotel," Bussenius said, sitting by the pool in a yellow polo shirt and slacks, a casual Caribbean hotelier in good humor even as he lounges in the eye of a political hurricane. "They were polite. Of course, it's a different

kind of atmosphere for us."

When they first arrived, Nicolas Bussenius, Walter's 28-year-old son and the hotel manager, said he wasn't scared, but he was nervous.

"I worried, not about the government forces coming, but like I would be worried if there were 150 armed guys sleeping in my lobby," he said.

The rebel leaders have taken rooms in the hotel. Dozens of rebels lounge in the lobby most of the day. After the sun goes down, they nap in lounge chairs by the pool.

Nicolas sleeps little, spending his time managing the hotel - making sure the food arrives on time and getting fuel for the generator that makes his place an oasis in the midst of the chaos. In addition to electricity and water, his guests are treated to Internet via satellite, quite a luxury in a city where the phones have been out since Sunday and even cellular service is cut off.

The rebels have been good guests so far, and they have promised to pay their bill.

"They are not rowdy. When they leave the hotel at night to do their patrols, they do not make much noise, they are almost respectful," Walter Bussenius said. "They don't smoke, they don't drink much, they're very quiet."

Just three months ago, Aristide stayed here.

'HOTEL MARDI GRAS'

Walter read aloud the whimsical letter he wrote his son in the wee hours of the morning on Fat Tuesday the final day of Carnival here.

"My dear son," he said. "In a few

days, the hotel will celebrate its golden anniversary. A few months back, President Aristide sojourned here with his whole government and today rebels are taking showers.

“I think in celebration of the anniversary, we should make an outstanding announcement. I authorize you to change the name of the hotel to Hotel Mardi Gras. Let the celebration continue.”