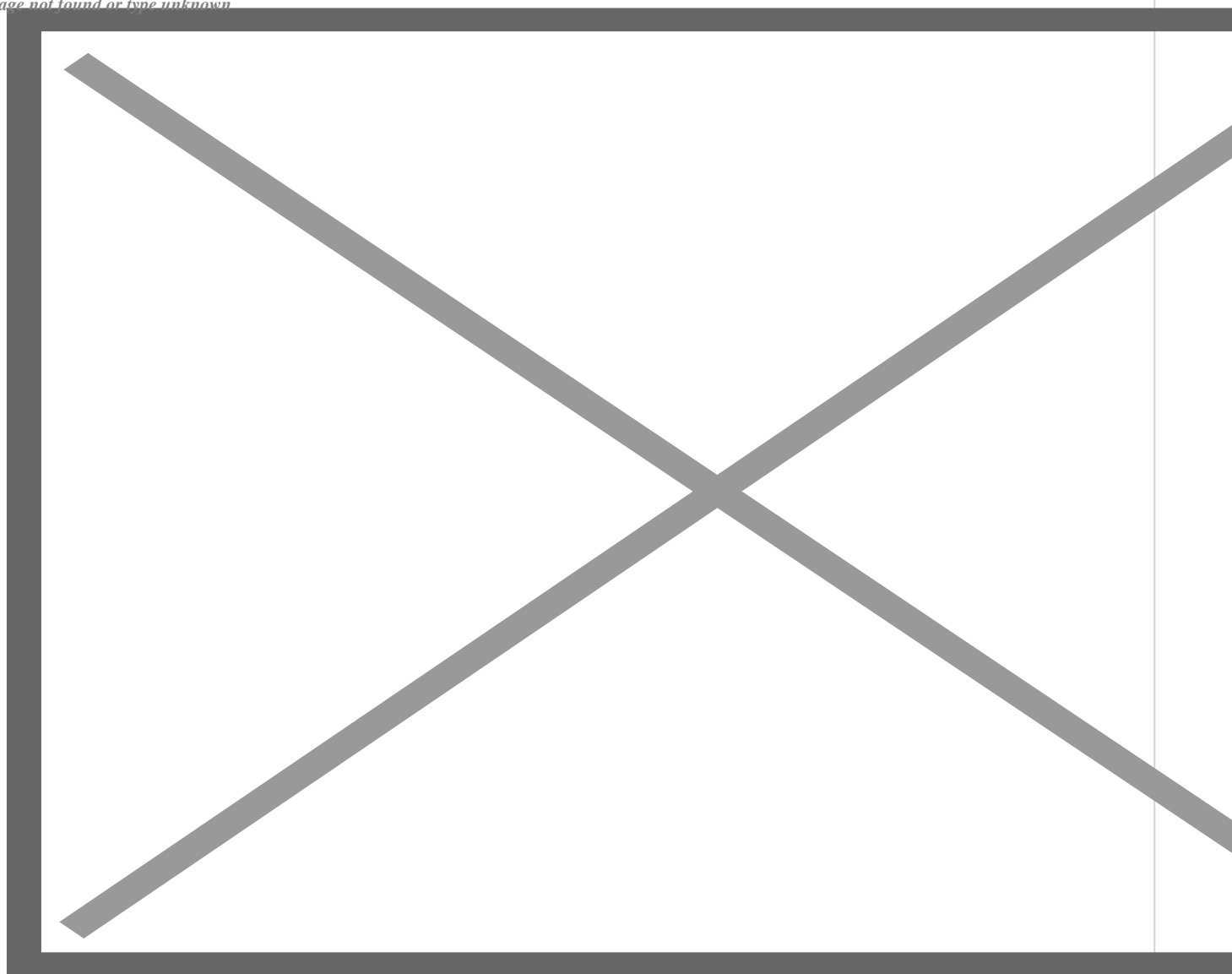


Haiti blames U.S. and Colombian suspects in president's murder

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People cheer as a police car drives past at the Petionville Police station where armed men, accused of being involved in the assassination of President Jovenel Moise, are being held in Port au Prince on Thursday [Valerie Baeriswyl/AFP

Port-au-Prince, July 9 (RHC)-- A 28-member hit squad made up of Americans and Colombians assassinated President Jovenel Moise, Haitian police said Thursday, adding that eight were still at large as the country lurched into political chaos.

One day after Moise was killed and his wife Martine wounded by gunmen in their Port-au-Prince home, the poorest country in the Americas has no president or working parliament and two men claiming to be in charge as prime minister.

Police paraded some of the suspects before the media on Thursday, along with Colombian passports and weapons they had seized. The head of the Haiti's National Police, Leon Charles, vowed to track the other eight down.

"It was a team of 28 assailants, 26 of whom were Colombian, who carried out the operation to assassinate the president," Charles said at the press conference in Port-au-Prince. "We have arrested 15 Colombians and the two Americans of Haitian origin. Three Colombians have been killed while eight others are on the loose."

Colombia's defense minister Diego Molano also said at least six members of the hit squad appeared to be Colombian ex-soldiers, and that he had ordered the army and police to help with the investigation. "The initial information indicates that they are Colombian citizens, retired members of the national army," Molano said in a video sent to news media.

Hundreds of residents clamored outside a police station in the capital, Port-au-Prince, where suspects were being held, shouting "burn them" and setting fire to a vehicle they presumed was that of the assassins.

Police chief Charles described the killers as "mercenaries" and said that security forces had engaged in a fierce gun battle with the suspected assassins that lasted late into the night. "We have the physical authors, now we are looking for the intellectual authors," Charles said.

One of the men arrested is a Haitian-American US citizen named James Solages, Haiti's minister of elections told the Associated Press. The U.S. State Department could not confirm if a U.S. citizen was among those arrested.

President Moise was killed at his private home in the early morning hours of July 7 by what appears to be a group of highly trained killers, opening up a political vacuum just as Moise and other civil leaders were preparing for elections and discussing revisions to Haiti's constitution.

Moise, elected in 2016 with less than 600,000 votes out of a potential 6.1 million, was sworn in as president in 2017. Opposition parties had said Moise's term should have ended in February, five years after his predecessor stepped down, and say he was trying to hold on to power by decree. Moise had contended his term extended until 2022.

A nation of 11 million, Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas with 4 million people living in hunger, widespread gang violence and armed groups controlling broad areas of the country including many neighbourhoods in Haiti's capital. It faces a COVID epidemic and has been racked with political instability.

Moise on July 5 appointed a replacement prime minister for Joseph, Ariel Henry, who had been forming a new government at the time of the assassination. Henry had not been sworn in and challenges Joseph's legitimacy.

According to Haiti's constitution, Moise should be replaced by the president of Haiti's Supreme Court, but the chief justice died in recent days from COVID-19, leaving open the question of who might rightfully succeed to the office.

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